

A Qualitative Case Study of How a Title I High School Principal Strategized for Student  
Achievement

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## ABSTRACT

After years of costly school improvement efforts, including Georgia's most recent \$400 million Georgia Race to The Top Grant, the state's high schools have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement. The purpose of this study was to analyze a high performing Georgia Title I high school principal who has participated in school improvement efforts at his assigned school where school-wide student achievement has improved significantly under his leadership. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement.

Purposeful sampling methods were used to choose a principal of a Georgia Title I high school. The chosen principal led his school to improvements in student achievement, including a 20% increase in graduation rate and an 18-point increase in the Georgia CCRPI score.

The study's findings determined numerous methods the principal used to increase student achievement at the Title I high school. Teacher participants and the principal discussed how the culture established at the school played a vital role in the school's turn around. The principal was touted for his clear communication style and for supporting those around him. The principal encouraged his teachers to innovate instructional practices and also initiated an alternative center to directly help students who were short on credits to accelerate their learning, which directly affected the graduation rate at the school.

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## DEDICATION

To JE and Carter:

My wish for you is to find the place where your love, your passions, and your life's work converge. This existence brings light from the dark, is salve for the pain of world, and brings clarity to the complexity of the universe. Live this life well lived.

Your Dad loves you.

## I.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview

Critics have identified issues with the American education system for decades. President Lyndon Johnson initiated the federal government's involvement in ensuring success for all students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed in 1965, was the first federal attempt to bring equality to schools ("Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)", n.d.).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education developed a 683-page document entitled *A Nation at Risk*, outlining the mediocrity present in American education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Since that time, a great deal of educational research has been conducted, and society itself has continued to evolve and change, but the overall success of schooling and student achievement has not made significant improvement (Peterson, 2010).

The No Child Left Behind Act was a subsequent iteration enacted in 2001. This act challenged schools at a different level and held them accountable for student progress as evidenced on standardized test scores ("Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)", n.d.). The accountability enacted within the law also began to change the requirements of the principal. The openness and public availability of school data challenged principals to become better instructional leaders (Tavakolian and Howell, 2012).

During this time, Georgia schools were also facing more accountability measures, and in 2000, with the election of Governor Roy Barnes, there was a call for improved leadership in both districts and schools (Croft, Roberts, and Stenhouse, 2016). In 2002, Governor Barnes named a special committee, the Georgia Institute for School Improvement, that began the task of collecting research and forming best practices for leaders within the state. Even with these efforts, there have not been drastic improvements in education for Georgia students (Croft, Roberts, and Stenhouse, 2016).

#### Statement of the Problem

After years of costly school improvement efforts, including Georgia's most recent \$400 million-dollar Georgia Race to The Top Grant, Georgia's high schools have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement.

The state uses the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) accountability system to compute an annual grade for high schools based on overall achievement, school progress, and improvements made on reducing the achievement gap. Extra points are given for progress made with students who are economically disadvantaged, English language learners, or students with disabilities. This system began in 2012. In 2012, the state average score for high schools was 73; in 2013, it moved to 72; in 2014, the score plummeted to 68.4, which by the scale would signify a failing state score. Since 2014, there has been some progress, with scores of 75.8 in 2015, 75.7 in 2016, and 77 in 2017. However, the formula for scoring continues to be restructured by the Georgia Department of Education, which can make year-to-year comparisons difficult ("College and Career Performance Index", 2017).

Although the state has shown some gains in graduation rates from 2012-2016,

20% of students are dropping out of high school (“Downloadable Data”, n.d.). Many graduates are finding themselves unprepared for college, career, and life (Royster, Gross, and Hochbein, 2015). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) showed only 39.4% of students who began their four-year programs in 2007 had completed degrees by 2011. Also, statewide data from the 2011-2012 school year to the 2016-2017 school year showed no significant gains in SAT or ACT scores. Both indicators show no progress in student achievement was made as a result of the state’s initiatives (“Downloadable Data”, n.d.).

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified, high-performing Title I high

school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

### Significance

After years of costly improvement efforts to include Georgia's Race to the Top Grant, Georgia's high schools, and specifically Georgia's Title I schools, have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement. The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement. This study may benefit organizations responsible for creating policies and programs focusing on principal development to include the United States Department of Education, state departments of education, university and college principal leadership development programs, and regional education service agencies responsible for principal leadership development programs. Local school districts may use the findings of this study to better prepare future school principals and practicing school principals. Individual school principals may use these findings to initiate school improvement strategies at their assigned schools.

Fullan (2008b), Karp (2006), and Williamson (2011) indicated a strong correlation between successful schools and successful principals. Therefore, analyzing the strategies used by a successful principal may garner valuable data for multiple stakeholders in the educational field. The data may be used to assist principals engaged in school change, as well as larger organizations such as school systems, that train principals



to improve student achievement.

### Conceptual Framework

My personal background in educational leadership is what led me to this study. My experiences have formed my perceptions over the years about what I believe are the best strategies to improve student achievement and how a principal should go about incorporating those changes in a low-performing school. My experiences also have shown how my working within the system of a school district can make the job more complex. Often, what the principal may see as the best strategy for his or her school could contradict what a district initiative may be, or the bureaucracy of the district may hinder the strategies of the principal. Fullan (2008b) noted the principal should not settle for stability but should “reposition the role of the principal so that school leaders can be a force for school and system transformation” (p. 3). Fullan (2008b) suggested leaders should not just work to change their schools but should work to change the educational system altogether. Systematic change is hard for stakeholders in schools, especially teachers, students, and parents. Principals working toward lasting change must find new ways to implement school improvement that will continue to impact student achievement even after they are gone.

The change Fullan (2008b) refers to may have to be different than previous leadership models, many of which are linear in nature, and often can be contradictory to one another (Fullan, 2001). Fullan (2001) provided some examples of these contradictions by outlining the work of several researched leadership models. He described Kotter’s (1996) top-down approach to organizational transformation. Additionally, he referred to the work of Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector (1990) who

described how bottom-up energies are best for organizational change. Fullan (2001) expressed how Hamel's (2000) work encouraged teachers to "lead the revolution" in educational organizations whether one is at the top or the bottom. All are linear, step-oriented systems that could leave leaders more confused than enlightened when they are compared together (Fullan, 2001).

A decade ago, Fullan (2008b) recognized that the job of the principal was changing tremendously. The work is more complex, and what is expected from principals compared with the resources they are provided to do the job is setting many up for failure. Many long-term principals find themselves in predicaments that are vastly different from the jobs they started. With a scarcity of qualified applicants for positions, many young educators are promoted before they are ready (Fullan, 2008b). One of the major findings in the Wallace Foundation's (2003) research asserted the system itself (state, district, school) is fragmented and possibly disconnected from the leadership of the school. Policies were often out of sync or even contradicted one another. Many districts attempted to solve the student achievement problem by hiring one great principal to turn around a low performing school. Unfortunately, these leaders are rare. The Wallace Foundation's (2003) findings also noted a common practice in schools, which was the failure to document and share successful practices.

Amid the chaos of today's society, social scientists have drawn from the natural sciences to find order in complexity. In short, what natural scientists began to uncover was that long-range forecasting was practically impossible, which goes strictly against the Newtonian view of predictability (Gleick, 2008). Any small bifurcation in the system can cause it to move in one of many unpredictable ways. Scientists later discovered,

however, within these complicated systems that seemed so unpredictable and chaotic, when one looks closely, “it is the processes associated with randomness, openness, that lead to higher levels of organization . . .” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, pg. xxi).

With the idea of order within chaos, many social science researchers tackled the problem of complexity with organizations (Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, 2000). The theories associated with this work included “chaos theory” or “complexity theory.” Burns (2002) claimed chaos is, in fact, the building block of the universe. Tetenbaum and Laurence (2011) contended there is order in chaos, and it is self-organizing. The ideas and theories toward complexity in the social sciences are now changing and being expanded upon at a rapid pace. Organizations are faced with new challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the added complexities that come with the dramatically increased pace of information flow (Friedman, 2005). What was the new thing one day would not be the new thing two months later. Leaders were challenged with doing more than simply managing their organizations. For success, they had to find focus and direction, teaching themselves and others to learn and adapt (Fullan, 2008a). Researchers indicated leaders could use chaos to help their organizations innovate and to disrupt stagnancy to engage people to be creative (Pascale, et. al., 2000).

Senge (2006) was one of the first to bring chaos to the forefront of the social science discussion with his work on systems thinking. His theories stemmed from complexity theory and are based on the belief leaders need to look at organizations as systems and see these systems holistically. Leaders must garner the understanding of how little changes and tweaks can have long-lasting effects once things are put in motion, much like weather systems (Gleick, 2008).

From systems thinking, researchers have now expounded upon non-linear systems. Organizational leaders can respond to these non-linear systems to help them grow and innovate. Fullan (2001, 2008a) looked both at organizational change, specifically school change, and how the role of the principal can fit into such change. He approached systems thinking from a slightly different view. Fullan pushed creating a learning organization and suggested moving from systems thinking to “systems doing” (Fullan, 2008a, p. 110). He believed in schools where all members involved should be working toward learning and improving themselves. This is a simple idea, but in many schools, researchers may find teachers and administrators stuck doing repetitively what they have always done (Olson, 2009). Fullan’s (2008a) contention was that real learning organizations would push themselves and their colleagues to improve their crafts. There must be collaboration, communication, and sharing of ideas and innovations in these organizations. Human relationships are complex, and launching these endeavors, even in the best of circumstances, can be extremely challenging for leaders.

Sarason (1995) posited the success or failure of a school has a great deal to do with how principals manage the culture of their schools. School culture is defined as a shared set of values and beliefs in the organization or the way things are done in certain organizations (Alkire, 1995; Deal and Peterson, 1990; Karadag, Kilicoglu, and Yilmaz, 2014; McKinney, Labat, and Labat, 2015). Deal and Peterson (1990) contended there are many ways a principal can affect the culture of his building. Some researchers expressed the importance of leaders to become “symbolic leaders,” who take their roles as the lead of the organization seriously and use their positions to implore others to react (Alkire, 1995; Deal and Peterson, 2016). Other researchers purport one of the most effective ways

leaders can influence the culture of their schools is by whom they hire to work for their organizations (Cranston, 2012). McKinney et al. (2015) asserted it is the principal's job to establish an environment where both teachers and students could flourish. The authors contended this environment should be one where academic learning and instructional practice take the forefront. This environment requires students to trust teachers and administrators, and for teachers to trust the administration (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2018). Additionally, within this environment communication is prevalent, information is shared freely, and candor takes precedence over feelings when it comes to what is best for students (Scott, 2017; Williams, 2015). School culture in itself can be an enigma (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The principal's role is to sift through the complexities of the culture in order to allow teachers the freedom to innovate instructional practice and do their work with diligence and passion (Fullan, 2008b).

#### Summary of Methodology

This study identified the experiences of a Title I high school principal, the barriers he faced, and the strategies he used to increase student achievement at his school. A single qualitative case study methodology was used in this study. Stake (1995) argued for the importance of the single case. He noted each case entails its own specifics and, complexities, and functions on its own. Purposeful sampling procedures were used to identify the principal with a record of exceptional school leadership.

Once the principal was identified, several data collection methods were used to answer the research questions. These included Siedman's (2013) three-interview series technique and the participant-as-observer method of taking field notes, which originated with Gold (1958) and was used by Wolcott (1973). One interview each with three

teachers identified from snowball sampling was also conducted. School documents and data were collected from the research site to get a full view of how and why the principal strategized as he did. Data comparative methods were used for analysis; all data were analyzed by coding, and analytic memos were created and ultimately put into themes to provide more evidence to answer the research questions. The data were then scribed into a narrative that reflected the findings of the process. This final narrative responded to the research questions, explaining the lived experiences of the principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies he used to increase student achievement at the research site (Patton, 2002).

#### Limitations

Subjectivity was the first threat to data addressed. I spent more than 17 years in a high school setting, working in some capacity. Although I was not a part of the staff, nor did I spend any amount of time in my chosen research site prior to the study, I have witnessed and been a part of school change and improvement efforts in varying environments and circumstances throughout my career. It would be impossible for me to turn off my experiences and scratch them from my memory. My experiences are a part of me and were a part of my research. I continuously reminded myself of my biases and searched for ways to recognize them when they arose.

Peshkin (1988) suggested one can accomplish this task by identifying his or her “subjective I’s,” which can help ensure researchers make decisions about the biases they may have with various subjects or circumstances. My deep-seated beliefs were addressed by creating my own “subjective I’s.” First were my beliefs about instruction. I believe a student-centered learning environment is paramount to the success of students. The

second belief I carry is in relation to the complexity of schools. I believe complex environments must be dealt with from leadership in non-linear ways to increase student achievement.

While focusing on what specific strategies and methods for instructional leadership the principal employed at his school, I emphasized what I identified as my “Learning I,” or my predetermined biases on what strategies should be employed to improve student achievement from an instructional basis. The other “subjective I” focused on what I termed my “Complexity I.” I hold strong beliefs that linear leadership practices cannot be effective in complex human environments, which would include most secondary education environments. I determined and anticipated when these beliefs arrived and came to terms with these feelings, which allowed me to keep an open mind.

Also, with the research methods selected, I did not discount the effect reactivity had on my study. Maxwell (2013) stated when observing others, the researcher’s presence actually plays much less of an influence on the participant than the research setting itself. The author asserted reactivity is not a serious threat under these circumstances. My participant-observer status derived from Wolcott (1973) did not induce a great deal of worry in how the principal reacted with my observing him in his environment. However, Maxwell (2013) contended the interviews conducted absolutely were susceptible to reactivity as “what the informant says is *always* influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation” (p. 125). The interviewer influencing the interview is unavoidable. Preparation, not asking leading questions, and an understanding of how the interview was being influenced by the setting, the line of questioning, and the way questions were asked helped to eliminate my influence on the participant. Siedman (2013) offered some clear

ideas on specific techniques to help with reactivity. These techniques were used in this research and included listening more and talking less, asking open-ended questions, and asking the subject to tell a story.

Methods utilized in data collection reduced or eliminated the limitations outlined in the study (Siedman, 2013). The intentional collection of rich data eliminated many limitations. The first step taken to collect rich data included a series of interviews with the principal. Multiple interviews on different dates provided opportunities within the interview process to gain clarity by giving the principal chances to both clarify and expand upon the information given. The series began in interview one, in which I gained background information about the principal and his life experiences. Interview two explored specifically how he obtained his vision for the site and his view of his influence on the research site from the strategies he implemented for student achievement. A third interview allowed the principal to talk about his plan to continue positive school growth and reflect on the meaning of what has occurred in his work. Following this model for interviews provided a clear opportunity to collect a wealth of data and the opportunity to delve deeper and ask for further clarity and explanation. Respondent validation was key to collecting both rich and clear data. The interview process provided the opportunity to have the subject validate what he meant and clarify understanding.

Field notes taken while conducting observations of the principal also contributed to the depth of the study. The length of time spent with the principal offered insight into how the principal worked in a variety of situations. The observations provided the opportunity to make clearer inferences and connections to the indirect strategies the principal used to improve student achievement at this school.



## Definition of Terms

The following definitions were applied throughout this study.

*CCRPI*. College and Career Ready Performance Index. “CCRPI is a comprehensive school improvement, accountability, and communication platform for all educational stakeholders that will promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students” (“College and Career Performance Index”, 2017, paragraph 1).

*Chaos Theory*. “An explanation of the behavior of a system that can be described by nonlinear equations where the output of one calculation is taken as the input of the next. After multiple iterations the calculation takes on characteristics of non-linearity and becomes specifically unpredictable while all the time remaining in a determined pattern” (Burns, 2002, p. 44).

*Complexity Theory*. Complexity theory draws from natural science research and involves uncertainty and non-linear systems. Complexity theory emphasizes interactions and the feedback loops that consistently change systems. The theory proposes that systems are unpredictable but yet can be restrained with order generating rules.

*End Of Course Milestone*. The Georgia Milestones Assessment System is a broad assessment system spanning grades 3 through 12. The End of Course Milestone exams are set for secondary education within the state. High school students take End of Course tests for each of the 10 areas designated by the State Board of Education. The Georgia Milestones are touted as being more rigorous than the original End of Course exams given by the state (“Georgia Milestones Assessment System”, 2017).

*End Of Course Test*. The End of Course Test is a statewide Georgia assessment retired by the Georgia Department of Education in November of 2014. The final

configuration of EOCT's comprised the following secondary courses of study: Coordinate Algebra, Analytic Geometry, United States History, Economics, Physical Science, Biology, Ninth Grade Literature and Composition, and American Literature and Composition ("End of Course Tests", 2017).

*High-Performing Title I High School.* For this study, a high-performing Title I High School was determined by the Title I school being in the top 10% of Title I high schools by CCRPI score in the 2015 results.

*High-Performing Title I High School Principal.* For this study, the principal was identified as high-performing by student and school data. The school was identified as being in the top five Title I schools in the state by CCRPI score. The school, under the principal's leadership, had raised the CCRPI score by 18 points and increased the graduation rate by 20 percentage points.

*Newtonian Mindset.* This mindset is derived from the scientific inquiry of Isaac Newton (1642-1727). His delve into the laws of nature brought forth the belief that outcomes could be consistently predicted when these laws were followed and studied carefully. The environments where these outcomes were present were "linear, orderly, and predictable" (Liang, 2013, pg. 3).

*Participant-as-Observer.* Wolcott (1973) described his use of the participant-as-observer method from Gold's (1958) model. Under this model, the researcher's role is known by all, and he or she is present in the environment as a "scientific observer" who predominately observes and does not participate.

*Race to the Top.* Race to the Top was a federal program supported by the U.S. Department of Education that totaled more than \$4 billion in grants. The intention of the

program is to support states in implementing four key components, including adopting standards and assessments to help students be successful in college, informing teachers and principals of their schools' progress by creating student data systems, helping to find and retain exemplar educational leaders and teachers by developing and rewarding them, and improving the most struggling schools ("Race to the Top Fund", 2016). Georgia received \$400 million ("Race to the Top (RT3) Plan", 2017).

*School Culture.* School culture is a shared set of values or beliefs prevalent in the organization (Alkire, 1995; Deal and Peterson, 1990; Karadag, et. al., 2014; McKinney, et. al., 2015).

*Significant Improvement in Student Achievement.* For this study, significant improvement in student achievement would be a school that has improved its CCRPI score by more than 10 points or its graduation rate by more than 10 percentage points. Gains of this nature are uncommon for Georgia high schools in a one to three-year period, which would make such gains significant.

*Student Achievement.* For this study, student achievement is when students show a distinct understanding of course content and can show mastery of content or distinct improvement on standardized assessments.

*Systems Thinking.* "A conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that have been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively" (Senge, 2006, p. 7).

*Title I High Schools.* Title I programs use federally based monies channeled through the Georgia Department of Education to support public schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students to help ensure all students meet

academic achievement standards. To be considered a school-wide Title I school, the school must have more than 40% of its students accepted for Free and Reduced Lunch under the federal guidelines (“Federal Programs”, 2017).

### Summary

Critics continue to indicate the faults with the American education system. Significant improvement in student achievement continues to be the exception instead of the rule. The role of principal is rapidly changing into a more complex job (Fullan, 2008b). No longer can principals simply manage their buildings; much more than management is required and expected. Failures the principal may endure will now be very public, since school data can be accessed easily by all stakeholders (Friedman, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. This study focused on the lived experiences of the principal, the barriers he has had to overcome, and the strategies he used to overcome these barriers.

A case study methodology was used to document and understand the phenomena of student achievement gains at the chosen research site. The principal himself was the subject of the case study, and data were collected by interviewing the principal, observing the principal as he went about his work, and studying documents that represent the goals of the research site and its workers.

## II.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

After years of costly school improvement efforts, including Georgia's most recent \$400 million Georgia Race to The Top Grant, Georgia's high schools have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement.

The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement. Leading schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and increasing student achievement with student populations who are economically disadvantaged can be complicated and intense work (Fullan, 2008b). Shaha, Glassett, Copas, and Ellsworth (2015) asserted Title I students are the most difficult populations to reach when looking for increased student achievement and standardized test scores. A great deal of these complications can be associated with the fact that schools are social systems (Green, 2000; Schlechty 2005). Leading such systems becomes very complex. Often small changes within systems can, over time, have large effects to the overall health of the organization (Senge, 2006). Principals must learn to balance these complexities, and

systems thinking and complexity or chaos theory may provide a basis for what will work for some leaders (Fullan, 2008a; Pascal et al., 2000; Senge, 2006; Stacey, 1992). Hallinger and McCary (1990) also stated principals must think strategically and consider actions they take within a social system in order to allow for organizational improvement.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified high-performing, Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

After years of costly improvement efforts to include Georgia's Race to the Top Grant, Georgia's high schools, and specifically Georgia's Title I schools overall, have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement. The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine what barriers the principal faced and what strategies the principal used to deal with the extremely complex problem of increasing school-wide student achievement. This study may benefit organizations responsible for creating policies and programs focusing on principal

development to include the United States Department of Education, state departments of education, university and college principal leadership development programs, and regional education service agencies responsible for principal leadership development programs. Local school districts may use the findings of this study to better prepare future school principals and practicing school principals. Individual school principals may use these findings to initiate school improvement strategies at their assigned schools.

This literature review is divided into three sections. The first addresses the state of the American education system and the education system in the state of Georgia. Data are provided to explain how significant gains in student achievement have not been met, and how the progression of expected progress and transparency of school performance have affected the job of a school leader. This section also introduces some of the struggles principals may face in secondary schools, especially those designated as Title I schools.

The second section focuses on the theoretical and practical practices principals may use to improve student achievement in their organizations. This section is divided into subsections. The section begins with a detailed review of the conceptual framework of the study with chaos or complexity theory and how this theory has evolved from the natural sciences to the social sciences. Many social scientists believe quality leaders can use an understanding of these theories to their advantage when strategizing on how to improve their organizations (Paschal et al., 2000; Stacey, 1992). From chaos theory emerged systems thinking. Systems thinking is also a part of the conceptual framework of the study. The world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more intertwined and changing at a rapid pace (Briscoe, 2015; Friedman, 2005). It is important for leaders to understand the different levels of a system and how these complex levels could reframe the ways leaders think

and bring about change (Briscoe, 2015; Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, 2015). Systems thinking can be a basis for how organizational leaders structure strategies for improvement.

The next sub-section, Common Practices of Secondary School Leaders, explores some of the many methods principals use to increase student achievement. The sub-section begins by showing how chaos theory and systems thinking have been modernized and changed by others who have developed further non-linear change models for organizations, specifically for schools. The complexity a school organization entails can make change for student achievement a difficult undertaking (Dempster and Berry, 2003; Fullan, Hill, and Crevola, 2006; Hallinger and McCary, 1990). Fullan's (2008a) idea of creating the "learning organization" plays a vital role in the further development of systems thinking. This sub-section additionally explores other common methods principals may use to increase student achievement.

The idea of the "learning organization" leads to the final section of this chapter, which explores the idea of how school culture plays a major role in school change and in the actions a principal may take to attempt to improve student achievement. Understanding school culture and the collaboration required with all stakeholders is vital for principals attempting to improve their schools and re-culture their organizations (Fullan, 2002).

The methods used for review of the literature were systematic searches for relevant literature as they applied to the subjects outlined. Key words were designated for each of the subjects. Searches in relevant databases for literature were conducted for the key terms outlined. Relevant literature from these key searches was reviewed, and



relevant sources were fully studied. Other sources, primarily book sources, were already reviewed by the researcher prior to the study or were recommended to the researcher by colleagues.

Most searches were for literature from the last 30 years. At times, in order to obtain primary source documents for relevant sources and fully understand where theories originated, articles and books ranging range back as far as 1958 were used. The text for one of the primary research methods was originally published in 1973, which is outside of the 30-year range. The researcher's goal was to provide a holistic view of the research to understand the existing theories being used within the study.

#### Description of Literature

##### *The State of American Education*

For decades, there has been a call for school reform and for improvements to teaching and learning within our schools. The rate of student achievement in our country has not improved, and a stagnant overall learning curve has overtaken American schools that were leading the world in the 1950s (Peterson, 2010; Waldron and McLeskey, 2010). During this time, the educational system was one of the major factors moving America from a burgeoning world power to the leader in industry and innovation. Since this time, the world has caught up and even surpassed U.S. students on many fronts (Peterson, 2010). For example, the 2012 PISA performance report had the United States ranking 27<sup>th</sup> in mathematics, 17<sup>th</sup> in reading, and 20<sup>th</sup> in science among the 34 OECD countries compared in the report (OECD, n.d.). Technology makes the world a much more interconnected and mobile place. Competition for jobs and market shares is at an all-time high. American educational leaders and educators must adapt in order for students to

keep up in the global economy. The information publicly available is increasing at far greater rates than we have ever seen in history. Students must know not only how to learn, but what to learn and how to discover what information is valuable (Friedman, 2005).

The first time Congress began the business of ensuring an education for each American student can be found in The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. At the time, the law fell under civil rights law. It offered grants to districts serving predominately low-income students. Other federal monies could be applied for by states and specific school districts targeting school improvement. One of the main components of the 1965 law was to ensure educational equal access to all American students, regardless of race or economic status (“Every Student Succeeds Act”, n.d.).

In 1981, the Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, established a committee to assess the American education system and how it was performing globally. The committee’s intention was to report on the quality of the American education system. The findings began the discussion of how society was changing, but the educational system was not changing at the same pace (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The report, *A Nation at Risk*, released by the committee two years later in 1983, put the struggles of the American educational system at the forefront. The wording chosen by the committee was very direct in what they believed was a national crisis. The report stated:

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the

United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, paragraph 1)

The report obtained a great deal of media coverage, which made legislators, educators, and American citizens begin to question the true quality of our educational system (Graham, 2013).

For almost the next 20 years, *A Nation at Risk* stood as a warning, and more research was conducted on the state of American schools. Educational entities began the task of finding ways to improve schools. In 2001, Congress enacted legislation challenging schools to make adequate progress in achievement for all students. Public law 107-110 was enacted on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002, as an extension of the existing ESEA from 1965, and came to be known as the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.” This 670-page document enacted specific targets schools should focus on, including improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged; preparing, training, and recruiting high quality teachers and principals; promoting informed parental choice and innovative programs; and flexibility and accountability for schools.

Through No Child Left Behind (NCLB), secondary schools were required to established annual gains the law referred to as Annual Yearly Progress (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2001). According to Tavakolian (2012), these heightened goals brought forth some unforeseen problems. The goal is to make all students score

“proficient” or better on their mandated state exams, and “as a direct result of this pressure to raise the percentage of every student to reach the proficiency level, schools have less incentive to work hard to keep low scoring students in their programs” (p. 72). Schools that could not meet these progress goals, which were predominately outlined through standardized state test scores, could be sanctioned by the state. In Georgia, these schools were publicly scrutinized as underperforming schools and could have the state intervene with the running of the school at different levels.

In 2007, NCLB was due for revisions. Congress, however, could not come to an agreement for the restructuring, and no changes were made. Many opposing views of NCLB continued to be expressed. Croft, et. al. (2016) stated, “In 2009 the Obama administration attempted to salvage it with the creation of RT3, a program which allowed states to apply for NCLB waivers” (p. 72). The authors additionally noted RT3 (Race to the Top) was less about providing equitability for students and more about the “Testing Industrial Complex” (p. 72). The authors believed these federal waivers and mandates were directly connected to major educational corporations that often were designed to profit from these waivers. Race to the Top, to date, has made no major progress in increasing student achievement nationally or in the state of Georgia (Weiss, 2014).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed and signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015. These actions renewed the 1965 ESEA and replaced No Child Left Behind. As Darrow (2016) described, the new ESSA act takes much of the role of the federal government away but still holds states and districts responsible for student achievement, predominately through test scores. The results of these tests and other data will still be used to identify low-performing schools. States and

districts then have the responsibility of determining what interventions are necessary to help these schools make improvements.

According to Croft, et. al. (2016), Georgia's political climate toward education has had major shifts since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The authors stated the shift has been one from a system that coupled "accountability with equity" to one of an "orchestration of inequality" (p. 71-72). In 2000, then Governor Roy Barnes established his A+ Education Reform Act, giving districts financial and structural supports to increase student achievement. For instance, in opposition to other political mandates, when this reform act called for decreased class size, it also appropriated funds to support districts in hiring more teachers. Croft, et. al. (2016) described this reform act as one that enhanced education within the state. A paramount concern for Governor Barnes was the leadership in Georgia's schools. A result of this concern was the creation of the Georgia Institute for School Improvement. This organization worked on establishing the factors important to the performance of leaders who would guide public schools (Croft, et. al., 2016).

Croft, et. al. (2016) described Governor Sonny Perdue's tenure as detrimental to equality in education. They contended the passing of charter school laws, which allowed for more flexibility and funding to these schools, as well as legislation giving tax exemptions and credits for private schools spread inequality. There were also austerity cuts of some \$4.5 billion during this time. Additionally, there were more intensive high stakes testing and accountability measures with no financial support. Considering greater accountability standards, test scores, and school rankings now widely available for public

scrutiny, the job of the principal has taken on a new level of responsibility for student achievement.

Georgia schools have also experienced stagnant student achievement over the last 20 years. From the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Georgia has been investing serious financial resources into school improvement efforts, mainly from federal programs. Most recently, the \$400 million Race to The Top grant was taken and distributed to improve student achievement. Although it may be too early to understand if this money will increase student achievement, the initial impressions are the state has not made major progress on national tests in some time. Using national data from the 2011-2012 to the 2016-2017 school years, statewide average SAT and ACT scores showed no significant gains: The ACT score was a 20.6 composite score in 2011-2012 and remained a 20.6 in 2016-2017. Both indicators show no progress in student achievement was made as a result of the state's initiatives ("Downloadable Data", n.d.).

Some schools are finding success, even with high populations of low socio-economic students who historically have not had high levels of student achievement (Rutledge & Cannata, 2016). When considering what makes these schools different, most major reports on successful student outcomes recognize the importance of effective leadership (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011; Rammer, 2007). Principals play key roles in the direction of schools, especially struggling ones, and they often bring a shared purpose to their educational organizations (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Successful schools have successful principals (Fullan, 2008b; Karp, 2006; Williamson, 2011). Researchers have worked hard to find out what the differences are between

principals who successfully increase student achievement and those who do not (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011).

There is considerable literature on the topic of what constitutes good leadership. Leaders must be change agents, and principals, especially in today's educational environment, must wear many hats and lead in many different ways to increase student success. Yet the job of principal continues to change and become more complex (Dempster and Berry, 2003; Fullan, 2008b; Hallinger & McCary, 1990).

Principals, as Fullan (2008b) pointed out, continue to face challenges. The interconnectedness of today's world can make their successes or failures with student achievement readily available for public perusal. Principals today are forced to determine the strategies that can move student achievement and to envision what this looks like (Kouzes and Posner, 2012). They must also develop appropriate strategies, employ the correct help, and then trust their employees through distribution of their leadership, as they cannot do such complex work on their own. It is also hard to train principals to solve problems in their organizations in linear ways, considering the complications that hinder success are often considered chaotic (Fullan, 2008b). Leading others while facing chaos, complexity, and the uncertainty of society is the prominent challenge for the social sector (Karp & Helgo, 2008).

Principals also face an array of other barriers. One such barrier, outlined by Hallinger and McCary (1990), is the deficiencies found in principal preparation programs. Some of the issues with these programs include no active practice at leadership duties, limited work on understanding exemplar teaching and learning, and inadequate socialization to situational job issues. Ash, Hodge, and Connell (2013) reported one

reason principals are not prepared for their jobs can be attributed to a shortage of qualified candidates. The authors explained large numbers of retirements, plus the increased complexity and pressures associated with the job, continue to make the recruitment of qualified principals difficult for superintendents. Often, talented young educators are promoted to leadership before they are ready.

Navickaite and Janiunaite (2012) added that leaders face both external and internal challenges, including interference from superiors, little independence with school finances, stakeholder attitudes toward change, conflicts of interest, a lack of willingness to learn as an organization, or a general lack of trust. Principals at different schools can face vastly different barriers, which expands the importance of leaders looking at systems as a whole and strategically thinking through complexities to increase student achievement (Hallinger & McCary, 1990).

Principals who lead schools with large percentages of economically disadvantaged students can also face barriers related to Title I schools being “the most challenging population for achieving significant gains in academic performance and standardized test scores” (Shaha, et al., 2015, p. 227). The recruitment and retention of quality teachers can be a challenge in such environments. Pearman and Lefever-Davis (2012) conducted a study with teacher candidates who worked in Title I elementary schools for their practicum work. The authors discovered all 12 participants had doubts they could control a classroom, and 11 of the 12 had doubts they could be effective teachers. Leaders in these schools will face difficult challenges. Isernhagen (2012) contended strong leaders are often the key to recruiting, retaining, and developing effective teachers. Isernhagen (2012) also stated it is important leaders in Title I schools



be given the autonomy to make personnel, scheduling, and decisions about the allocation of resources when they deem necessary.

Georgia's Title I schools lag behind their counterparts. In 2012, the first year for CCRPI, the average score of all Title I high school, grades 9 through 12, was 63.9. The lowest score came in 2014, when the average was 63.4. Since 2014, the Title I high schools have mirrored increases as the other schools have, but only the last score from 2017 showed Title I schools earning a passing score of 72.3—a score that still falls almost five full points behind other high schools.

### *Practices Principals May Use*

#### *A Complex Environment*

Newtonian science has ruled humanity for hundreds of years. These sciences, stemming from the work of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), supported the basic scientific beliefs that brought us to the point of the Industrial Revolution. The systems involved with Newtonian science are mechanistic and linear in nature, and can be predicted. Forecasting and using systems to determine outcomes can play an important part in the world today, especially in fields such as economics and finance. The initial laws established by Newton have been a fundamental building block for the natural and exact sciences for hundreds of years (Burns, 2002; Liang, 2013).

Relatively new ideas and theories exist in the social sciences to address the very problems educational leaders are facing. From Newton to Freud, the scientific world, both in the physical and social sciences, has made efforts to form linear models to show life's "nonlinear character" (Burns, 2002). At times, the world around us can be structured into linear models, but scientists have begun to challenge these theories under

turbulent, real-world circumstances. Most recently, over the last 20 years, this has emerged as an approach called the chaos theory paradigm (Burns, 2002).

Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist and mathematician, noticed in the early 1960s while studying weather patterns how near equilibrium systems needed a considerable shock to move them into a non-equilibrium state. He also discovered once the system operated in a more chaotic state, the system was highly sensitive to small incidences that can lead to complex structural changes for the system. These discoveries led to the further study of non-equilibrium systems. As a result, Lorenz coined the term “butterfly effect,” referring to how infinitesimal, initial changes in a chaotic state can cause drastic changes and developments in systems states (Gilstrap, 2013).

The work on chaos theory was furthered by other scientists as these theories continued to emerge, and Newtonian science alone was not sufficient to deal with non-linear systems, such as complex systems and complex adaptive systems (Liang, 2013). The life’s work of Ilya Prigogine, a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, was set on explaining his beliefs about the second law of thermodynamics and his theories about non-equilibrium systems (Frangsmyr & Forson, 1993). He asserted the idea that, under certain conditions, entropy or chaos itself could become the initiator of order, which is a striking reallocation of the second law of thermodynamics. Prigogine & Stengers (1984) furthered the idea that small, initial fluctuations can become amplified to enormous, evolved systems. Prigogine & Stengers (1984) asserted extremely non-equilibrium systems and non-linear processes can help relate the physical sciences to softer sciences, including the social sciences. When scholars reconsider how entropy can coin social science terms such as “revolution” and “economic crashes,” it is easy to see how

bifurcations in systems can lead to fluctuations where chaotic circumstances can then result in restructured order (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984).

Scientists are also taking different mindsets and approaches when it comes to complexity theory. This work included systems thinking, evolution or biotic thinking, and connectionist or cybernetics thinking, all of which have slightly different approaches to how human systems and the natural world deal with complexity (Liang, 2013). These evolutions in non-linear thinking are causing pressures from different directions, and now a considerable number of researchers in many different fields, from the natural sciences to political science, is continuing to expand the field of complexity.

So how do educators go from the application of chaos in weather systems and in the physical sciences to understanding how the same natural factors can be used in systems of organizational management? Burns (2002) explained how “chaos has always been the organizing block of the universe” (p.44). Bureaucratic organization is a very linear system. As previously discussed, the job of organizational leaders, especially principals, is becoming more and more complex within our current society. This leads the researcher to believe a linear organizational system may no longer work for contemporary schools. Organizational leaders are being confronted with chaotic and complex systems states, often calling for a different means of organization (Gilstrap, 2013; Liang, 2013).

Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) was an early proponent of systems thinking in his work *General System Theory*. In a time when new technologies in mechanics, electronics, and chemicals were quickly emerging, new explanations for changes were needed.

Scientists began looking not just at parts, but at entire systems to help understand outcomes. Von Bertalanffy intoned,

Thus, a “systems approach” became necessary. A certain object is given; to find ways and means for its realization requires the systems specialist (or team of specialists) to consider alternative solutions and to choose those promising optimization at maximum efficiency and minimal cost in a tremendously complex network of interactions. (p. 4)

In his General System Theory, he saw the promise of this approach being relevant in the field of social science.

Senge (2006) brought systems thinking to the mainstream in 1990 with the original publication of his book, *The Fifth Discipline*. The book was revised and updated in 2006, and more than 100 pages were added about systems thinking and its application to business and schools. Senge (2006) explained “business and other human endeavors are also systems. They too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other” (p. 6).

The core disciplines Senge (2006) outlined are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. The fifth discipline, systems thinking, incorporates the other four. This is not a step-by-step linear process, but rather a change in the thought process around the problems leaders face. His work encouraged leaders to see the entire scope of a problem and not to expend valuable energy attacking the symptoms of everyday problems. He elaborated by stating, “By seeing wholes we learn to foster health” (p. 69). The origins of Senge’s beliefs are deeply engrained in what social scientists have referred to as chaos theory.

By seeing the whole, leaders can more effectively make sound decisions while contemplating probable outcomes of those decisions. Complexity makes future predictions very difficult, but understanding the system and how interrelationships occur within the system can help leaders make decisions that are sounder and less destructive to organizational health.

Senge (2006) encouraged leaders to empower those around them with systems thinking. To deal with complexity, leaders must no longer be the all-knowing expert who makes all decisions, but rather, they should empower others to lead in decision-making. This is a shared process, and it must also incorporate the individual learners and the way they approach change in order to take effect. Senge (2006) stated: “Organizations learn only through individuals that learn” (p. 129). Organizations will only move forward when the desire for personal mastery or the desire for personal growth become prevalent with all of the employees in the organization. The jobs of leaders when creating personal mastery in their organizations is to provide space for people at all levels of the organization to be creative and to help individuals in their pursuit of both personal and shared organizational goals. The connection with complexity theory relates to the organizational tension created when people are instilled with a new vision and are faced with the reality of the current state within the organization. This tension with motivated individuals creates the need for resolution. It gets to the internal motivation of each individual in the organization. When numerous people feel this tension and are obligated to find resolution, organizations move forward, great innovations are made, and remarkable feats can be accomplished.

Senge (2006) also goes into great detail about the importance of “mental models” to the organization and organizational health. He defined mental models as “how we understand the world and how we take action” (p. 8). In short, it is what individuals believe they individually or the organization as a whole can accomplish. What is possible, and what is not possible? Sometimes, even when individuals may truly believe in a change, the old mental models of the world they possess can be counterproductive to systematic improvements in practice. For instance, if principals believe the school district is constantly uncooperative and unsympathetic toward their needs, they may disregard an idea that could have been game-changing for their schools because of their mental model about the district. Good leaders will help to shape the mental models their employees hold. Senge (2006) contended: “Generative learning, in my experience, requires people at all levels who can surface and challenge their mental models before external circumstances compel them to do so” (p. 177). This requires members of the learning organization to actively pursue their personal beliefs candidly with each other and to bring their own opinions forward to keep one another in check, especially with leadership teams within the organization.

Another core discipline outlined by Senge (2006) is “shared vision.” Much of the literature on leadership refers to a vision or a shared vision within the organization. Many experts agree a shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides much of the focus and energy required to move organizations forward (Fullan, 2008a; Kouzes and Posner, 2012; Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) contended extrinsically developed visions can be successful in the short run, but for long-term organizational improvement, shared visions must tap into the people themselves. When people are

pulled by their personal beliefs and their will toward a greater good, production and progress will flourish. An ideal example in a high school would be a shared vision of graduating every student.

Another discipline Senge (2006) referred to was “team learning.” Senge (2006) described team learning as “the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire” (p. 218). In the sports arena, it is often known as “being in the zone,” and in music it can be described as music flowing through the artist instead of from the artist. Groups of people, when circumstances and talents align appropriately, can collectively take their crafts to new and unique levels. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has researched such phenomena for many years and coined the psychological term “flow” to describe these human experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). For “team learning” to truly occur at this almost mystical level, the other core disciplines must also be present and align. Robinson (2009) described this phenomenon by stating: “When we connect with our own energy, we’re more open to the energy of other people. The more alive we feel, the more we can contribute to the lives of others” (p. 94). People must believe in personal mastery, they must form and have similar mental models of the world, and they must have a shared vision, connected to them intrinsically, that drives their work. Authentic team learning can flourish within organizations when groups of people are pointed in the same direction with these components. When leaders embrace systems thinking, improvement can be garnered in multiple areas throughout the organization through focused goals, the desire for personal mastery, and strong mental models.

*Leading for Student Achievement*

Systems thinking has continued to evolve over the last 25 years. Stacey (1992) studied how chaos and complexity theory could relate to business and business management. He took Senge's theories from the first printing in 1990 of *The Fifth Discipline* a step further by contending wise business leaders can effectively harness and use chaos or instability within an organization to their advantage by reaching a point he refers to as "stable instability". Stability is most often associated with health, but Stacey contended organizational stability is overrated and perhaps even detrimental to organizational growth and enhancement. He refuted the belief that organizations are healthiest when they are stable. Instead, he took the view savvy leaders will embrace or even take advantage of unstable conditions to move their organizations forward. He explained that "without such instability, the system will be incapable of developing new, innovative forms of behavior. It will be trapped into endlessly repeating its past and present behavior" (p. 47).

Stacey (1992) goes further than Senge (2006) to emphasize how strategic chaos can benefit living human systems by causing reorganization. Instability drives the human desire for stability; hence, when complex, unstable environments are present, human systems tend to self-organize to steer back toward a stable environment. This instability could be caused by factors outside the organization, or they could be caused by factors inside the organization, including the organizational leader. Stacey (1992) stated: "Managers of excellent companies seek bounded instability, even though they many not explicitly be aware of doing so, because it is vital to success . . . successful managers use constrained instability in a positive way to provoke innovation" (p. 79). The availability of information in society continues to expand. With interconnectedness also comes



complexity. Seeing the organization as a system and being able to address it as a system seems to be coming to the forefront of what great organizational leaders are learning to do.

Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja (2000) furthered the discussion of using constrained instability to provoke productive behavior by contending this is “why the edge of chaos is so important. The edge is not the abyss. It’s the sweet spot for productive change” (p. 61). The authors discussed how complex situations can be used to leadership’s advantage to help organizations find new and innovative ways to go about business. Their take focused on leaders recognizing change opportunities by understanding the systems of which they are a part. When leaders understand the systems sustaining their organizations and seek out opportunities to provoke systemic change, they can use the natural flow of energy within the organization to incite needed innovation. The authors contended the research showed “equilibrium is death” in both natural systems and human systems such as organizations. They offer many examples from nature and business that show “when a long period of stability lulls a company into equilibrium, that condition is tantamount to a death sentence” (p. 25).

Fullan (2001; 2003; 2008a; 2008b) expanded on the best ways for leaders to harness complex systems, to think at the system level, and then to react on such understanding with guided practice and principles to help organizations continuously adapt and reassess their thinking. Throughout his numerous research and writings on change both in the business and in the school setting, he encouraged leaders to be aware of and to tackle certain issues within the chaotic environments that exist when change is needed or is occurring.

One of the most common themes throughout his research is the idea of leaders creating organizations that endure when they create “learning organizations”. His belief stems from the fact that within complex environments, science is proving no one cannot predict the future. This makes long-term strategic planning very difficult for leaders. One way organizations may combat these difficulties is to embrace complexity. When organizations look for innovative ways to solve problems, both individually and collaboratively in groups, they can endure tough times with unique solutions. Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) elaborated, “It is about learning to learn, about becoming independent thinkers and learners” (p. 3).

In his 2008 work *The Six Secrets of Change*, Fullan explained how he would expound upon Senge’s “systems thinking”:

Senge’s remedy was to increase the capacity to think systematically, in terms of the system as a whole, which would not resolve the problem, but would increase the probability of getting some of it right. An aside: the subsequent practical work of systems thinking has failed to produce leaders who can in accordance with system thinking. After all, Senge recommended that we develop a body of knowledge and related tools in order to “make the full patterns clearer and to help us see how to change them effectively”. Perhaps the failure to do this is related to the emphasis on system thinking rather system doing. And possibly it is related to the sheer megacomplexity of the twenty-first-century world. (p. 110)

Fullan (2001) explained it is the leader’s ultimate job to create an organization that can learn and adapt. Another major component Fullan elaborated on throughout his work is one ironically closely shared with Senge, which is his idea of creating a shared

organizational vision that speaks to everyone. Fullan (2001) referenced the idea when he speaks to “moral purpose”. From an organization’s leaders, this idea should drive those around them to work toward the greater good. Whether graduating every student in a school or providing a life-saving product at an affordable price in a business, these are the types of goals that most may easily grasp, believe in, and continuously work toward. More important, these are goals people will not disagree with. In his 2006 work *Breakthrough*, written directly for school leaders, he also expounded on moral purpose as the center for what can drive the organization into change and the candor and tensions that can come from it. Fullan (2008a) referenced the idea by “connecting peers and purpose”. He elaborated with “the key to achieving a simultaneously tight-loose organization lies more in *purposeful peer interaction* than top-down direction from the hierarchy. . . .The nuance is that connecting peers with purpose does not require less leadership at the top, but rather more—more of a different kind” (p. 41). Fullan (2008a) expanded on what he means by “purposeful peer interaction” by explaining organizational groups should share big-picture values (moral purpose), share what they learn and discover readily with others, establish checks and balances to identify both poor and excellent practices, and to learn from each as a group. These views are very similar to the “zone” Senge (2006) referred to in the realm of groups self-organizing, working, and learning toward a shared vision.

Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) tackled how schools can use these types of group interactions and learning to break through the stagnancy that has been prevalent for decades. Within this work, the authors referenced “the triple P core components” for school change, which are personalization, precision, and professional learning, all

surrounding moral purpose. This work is also an excellent example of how, when improving schools, educational leaders must embrace a school environment that is more complex, chaotic, and non-linear than the average school. The leader must embrace instability in order to create the changes needed to reorganize the human system which is American school.

The authors started by outlining personalization and describing it as being “the least advanced in practice of the three core components” (p. 16). Childress and Benson (2014) spoke to the definition of personalized learning by connecting it to “student learning experiences” (p. 34). To go further, they described how “what they learn, and how, when, and where they learn it—are tailored to their individual needs, skills, and interests, and that their school enables them to take ownership of their learning” (p. 34). Fullan, et al. (2006) expanded on their vision for personalized environments by insisting, in order for the move to personalization to be effective, it must be all inclusive. No students, teachers, administrators, or other stakeholders should be left out of this loop, and only with all working together toward this goal can personalization become a reality in schools.

The next link discussed by Fullan et al. (2006) is precision, which they described as “getting to the learning needs of the individual” (p. 18). Within this discussion, the authors pointed to teachers instructing to specific standards, to students having opportunities to see these standards, to taking into account where they are as learners, and to then working on the gap between where they are and where the standard is. For this deep, internal type of learning to occur, students must receive timely feedback from teachers. The types of feedback will serve two purposes. One, it will help the student to

see and work on learning gaps, and two, it will help the teachers also see faults in their own instruction. These understandings will help teachers to then go back and set goals, and refocus how these lessons were instructed and how they can improve.

Principals can focus on assessment to increase such feedback. According to Brown (2016), teachers use both formative and summative assessments. Summative assessments are what most people normally consider a test: a place where students are graded, and it is determined whether they have learned the material or not. Brown (2016) contended “formative assessments allow students to receive feedback in a more informative and timely manner. Furthermore, teachers are better able to adjust their instruction for students who have difficulty understanding the concepts” (p. 103). These assessments help teachers to make more informed decisions about their instruction and can increase student mastery of concepts.

Effective principals both use and empower their teachers to use data to move achievement forward (Arnold, Perry, Watson, Minatra, & Schwartz, 2006). These principals know how to collect data and how to analyze and present data to influence school needs when decision-making. Teachers can also use data in powerful ways. Formative assessments are one example of how teachers can collect and react to simple data on a daily basis to understand student needs and adjust instruction.

The final “P” included in Fullan et al.’s (2006) “triple P core components” is professional learning. Their definition of professional learning, however, is much different than what is commonly referred to within systems and schools as professional development. They see professional learning as something much more all-inclusive and all-encompassing. The authors contended true professional learning should happen every

day with groups of teachers who teach similar things. The authors believed the almost daily assessment of data and feedback that occurs within classrooms should be shared and discussed with colleagues in order for learning to occur. They contended professional learning should be both an individual and collective journey for teachers who are attempting to personalize their classrooms.

Moore, Kochan, Kraska, and Reames (2011) reported professional development can be a major strategy principals use to increase student achievement at their schools. Professional learning should be a place where dedicated principals will also put their resources. Brown (2016), in case study research, found one principal managed a faculty buy-in to save money to offer more professional development opportunities for her teachers. Teachers agreed, even though they would be required to cover an extra one-hour duty a week to save the money. Professional learning can help build capacity for principals. Initial investments in providing training individually to staff can pay dividends if these trained staff become leaders and advocates in their areas of training. Professional development can also help teachers to self-evaluate and self-reflect when they have choices of what they would like to learn.

Dee Hock (1999), former CEO of Visa, gave another perspective on leadership and how true leaders can find success. One of his major themes for leaders is to “manage those who have authority over us: bosses, supervisors, directors, regulators, ad infinitum” (p. 69). Hock (1999) believed up to a quarter of a leader’s time should be spent on this task. In a true learning organization, where change is imminent and traditional means to educate children are being challenged on a daily basis, the importance of this task cannot be overlooked. Relationships, from top to bottom in a learning organization, must be

developed. For leaders, the support of those above them or the lack of support is often the difference between success and failure when it comes to school change. Anytime there is change, there will be challenges (Johnson, 1998). A distinct understanding and support from a superintendent or a board of education could make the difference for a principal working for student achievement at his or her school. In a study by Nor and Roslan (2009), they noted when one principal was asked the one major thing that helped her turn her school around, “She said it is the sense of togetherness amongst its members. When members of the school understand the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of change and work together to achieve it, nothing is impossible” (p. 29).

The literature on non-linear leadership models is becoming more and more thorough and deep. Fullan (2001, 2003, 2008a) has conducted extensive research in various systems, districts, and schools within the United States and beyond. This research has begun to expand the understandings of what it means to lead in the very complex system which is school and how these leaders must be more open to “surfing chaotic circumstances” in order to change the way school is conducted—for the good of all students.

#### *School Culture/The Hidden Element*

School culture is often talked about and rarely understood. There are varying definitions of what school culture is among researchers and experts. Most researchers, however, can agree school culture has to do with a shared set of values or beliefs prevalent in the organization (Alkire, 1995; Deal & Peterson, 1990; Karadag, et al., 2014; McKinney, et al., 2015). The real mystery behind school culture comes more into play when one considers how the principal goes about imparting these values to a school

which has none. Leading a school is difficult, but leading for change in an organization that is not being successful while avoiding the cynicism and even the wrath of teachers can be challenging.

There are many facets to school culture, and there is no guide for a leader to know how to make positive strides. Fullan (2002) contended, “There is no step-by-step shortcut to transformation; it involves the hard, day-to-day work of reculturing” (p. 18). The secret for principals is knowing when and how to implement strategies to positively affect school culture, which in turn, can positively affect student achievement. Deal and Peterson (1990) addressed this by stating, “Cultural leadership is the art of fusing a personal vision with a school that needs direction” (p. 3). The leader must be the expert in matching the organization with the resources it needs to make improvements. Principals must understand the culture of the school before they can make lasting reform efforts come into fruition.

Schools in need of cultural changes also need leaders who can serve as “symbolic leaders” (Alkire, 1995; Deal & Peterson, 1990). Symbolic leaders who serve “. . . pay more attention to their symbolic or figurehead roles than do other leaders” (Alkire, 1995, p. 22). Symbolic leaders must first strive to take a holistic view of their organizations. They can fill the symbolic roles needed within the school, not hierarchically demand changes be made from their positions. These roles may include valuing routines and behaviors within the school, shaping what ceremonies or rituals the school employs, using language and writing to further the school’s image of itself, and overseeing and nurturing transitions and school changes that ultimately take place (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Those who lead symbolically are the first line in school change, although they



often cause the changes to come from within. Leaders reach the hearts of people and help them move themselves and others within the school to action.

One of the more important roles a good cultural leader will play is recruiter. Hiring decisions can often be overlooked, but they are one of the most vital roles that affect the school as a whole and school culture. According to Cranston (2012), principals play a vital role in creating their schools' culture, and one of the most remarkable ways they can do this is through hiring decisions. A good leader will not just establish a vision but will fill open positions with people who share his or her vision (Deal and Peterson, 1990). Sarason (1995) reflected on the principal and what a differentiated role he or she plays. To teachers, the principal's role is a very differentiated one. It is within these contexts the true meaning of how the principal affects culture can be understood. Teachers want someone who will fight for them, someone who observes fairly, and someone whom they perceive can get things done when others may not be able to. When it comes to hiring, teachers will expect the principal to bring on people who can fit into the culture, or even challenge the culture, in carrying out his or her vision (Sarason, 1995).

McKinney, et al. (2015) and Fullan (2008b) see the principal's role as a cultural leader, breaching the area that should be on the forefront of everyone's mind, and as the person responsible for shaping the appropriate environment where students can blossom and learn. McKinney et al. (2015) argued principals who are the most successful at changing school culture are the ones who share the belief the ultimate goal should be to improve student learning. One of the main challenges a principal may face is to find ways to challenge the academic culture of the building. McKinney et al. (2015) further

believed “teachers and staff members yearn for a working environment that is challenging as well as supportive” (p. 155). Teachers, as well as students, perform at their peak in environments that are academically focused. Fullan (2008b) challenged principals to develop a culture of learning, where administrators, teachers, and students are constantly working to improve. The job is to create a place where information is shared and where teachers collaborate with one another and challenge one another daily, forming true learning organizations.

One such way to form these types of learning organizations is outlined by Dufour and Mattos (2013) when they described how teachers improve considerably when they work in collaborative groups, or “professional learning communities” (PLC). The authors described the two main reasons PLC’s work in changing teacher behavior, which is “irrefutable evidence of better results and positive peer pressure” (p. 38). When teachers see first-hand how students in another teacher’s class continuously outperform their students on collaboratively developed assessments, it instinctively makes them curious about what the other teacher may be doing differently than them. They are more likely under these circumstances to actively work at changing their instructional practices and have colleagues assist them on a daily basis with feedback and suggestions. Akiri (2014) stated principals should “encourage individual teachers to be innovative” (p. 114). Making sure teachers have the time and space to collaborate can be a way to encourage such innovative practice.

Deal (1990) summed up the problem of culture and change when he stated, “In large measure, the core problems of schools are more spiritual than technical” (p. 12).

The process of learning is often trying for adults, much less adolescents. Sizer (2004) expressed this in his introduction of the now famous *Horace's Compromise*:

High schools exist not merely to subject the pupils to brute training—memorizing geometry theorems, dutifully showing up on time, learning how to mend an axle, reciting a passage from Macbeth—but to develop their powers of thought, of taste, and of judgement. High schools exist to help them with these uses of their minds. Such undertakings cannot be factory-wrought, for young people grow in idiosyncratic, variable ways, often unpredictably (p. 4).

Sizer (2004) stressed teachers, more so than programs and leadership, are what gives students a chance. Teachers will influence students, for good or bad. So it is the leader's job to create an environment where teachers can also flourish, grow themselves, and be the influence needed for students.

Olson (2009) stated the industrial era educational system must be changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the good of all. She spoke of the wounds schools often inflict on students that can be carried out through adulthood. She spoke of how teachers must not make the compromises Sizer (2004) referred to in his example Horace. Teaching, like leading a school, is complex work. Teachers not only need to know their subject matter, how subject matter is laid out in their curriculum, instructional strategies, and how to differentiate material for students, but “good teaching also involves a certain gravitas, a sense of receptivity and taking students seriously and of being deeply interested in them, and an ability to communicate passion and excitement for what is being taught” (Olson, 2009, p.120). Principals must set up cultures to encourage rigor and academic proficiency, but they also cannot forget to allow the time and space for teachers to get to

know their students. Students need teachers who will form relationships with them and care about them as people, and whom students trust enough to show their flaws. Teachers must learn to feel the same way about their colleagues, and this can only come when proper time and space is given for these types of trusting collegial relationships to occur. These are the cultural spaces that allow for great learning and great schools, and for superior student achievement to blossom and grow (Olson, 2009; Sizer, 2004).

#### Inferences for Forthcoming Study

After years of costly school improvement efforts, including Georgia's most recent \$400 million Georgia Race to The Top Grant, Georgia's high schools have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement. Too many of Georgia's students continue to drop out or graduate, and not make an adequate living, failing to obtain employment that would keep them and their families above the poverty level. 20% of students still fail to graduate from high school, and of the 80% who do graduate, many find themselves not prepared for college, career, and life ("Downloadable Data", n.d.; Royster, et al., 2015). School reform efforts need to be made toward improving the educational experiences and outcomes for students, especially disenfranchised students, in the state of Georgia.

The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified high-performing, Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

Quality leadership is paramount to gains in student achievement (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 201; Rammer, 2007). In 2002, Governor Roy Barnes was concerned enough about the leadership in Georgia's schools to form the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, which was tasked with coming up with best practices for educational leaders within the state (Page, 2010). Leithwood, Seashore-Johnson, Anderson, and Walstrom (2004) conducted research validating beliefs that leadership is second only to teaching in having the greatest impact on student achievement, and leadership had an even greater impact in schools with poor and diverse populations. The discussion continues about the importance of principals and the effect they can have on student achievement.

The methods and strategies principals employ appear to be of the utmost importance when principals aim to improve student achievement at their schools. Principals are also tasked in different ways than they were 10 years ago (Fullan, 2008b). The principal used to be a manager; the person who kept the facility, ensured safety, and

monitored teachers and other employees. Today's principals face more accountability. Students are tested at a higher rate on more rigorous tests, and information and test data are readily accessible to the media and public through statewide data systems. Life and the speed at which information is disseminated is running at a much faster pace (Friedman, 2005). At the least, principals are expected to manage the facility as described above and be instructional leaders who guide teachers and staff in teaching students. Fullan (2002) contended "the role of the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the weight of the kinds of reforms that will create the school that we need for the future" (p. 17). The current job of a principal is much more complex, and those who are successful are often leaders who embrace innovation and change, and then incorporate these complex changes into the fabric of their organizations (Fullan, 2008b).

Complexity theory has provided social science with greater understandings and leaders with guidance of how to lead complex, fast-paced organizations, such as a secondary educational institution. One of the major themes resulting from this research is creating organizations that learn and adapt as teams (Dufour & Mattos, 2013; Fullan, 2001, 2008a; Fullan, et al., 2006; Senge, 2006). In order for a principal to obtain this level of commitment and support from all staff, they must also work hard at setting an appropriate culture within their organizations to allow for consistent learning and innovation (Deal & Peterson, 1990). A strong visionary goal for principals can often be a good place to begin tough discussions with stakeholders in a school that needs improvement. McKinney, et al. (2015) contended when student learning is used as the rallying point and remains the focus, principals can be successful. Effective instructional

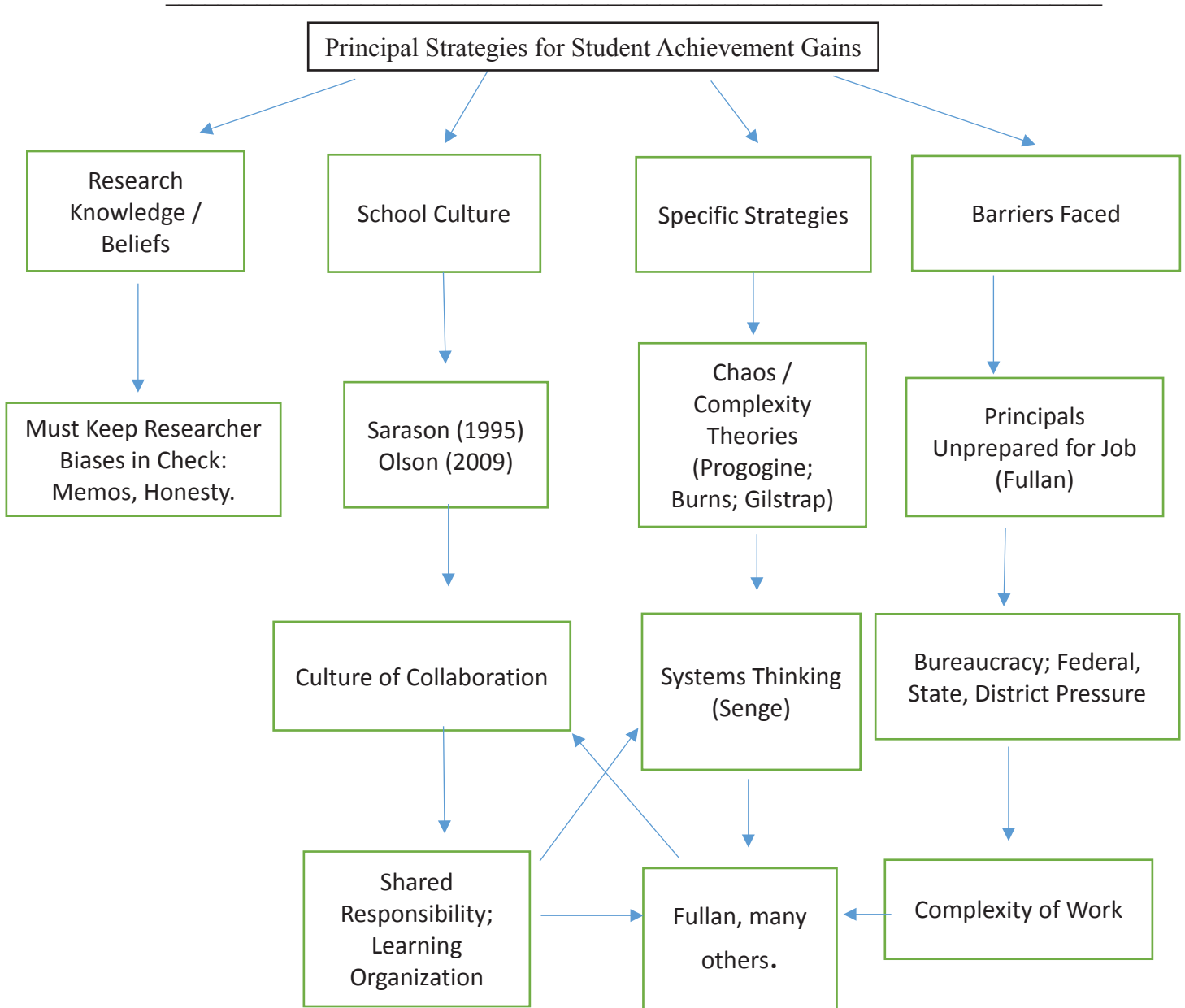
discussions can be had without direct judgment when student learning and achievement are the desired outcomes by all.

Principals also need support to make these types of changes happen. Hock (1999) encouraged organizational leaders to spend a substantial percentage of their time “managing” their superiors. When principals are transparent with those who support them, and their superiors at the district office understand their vision and desired outcomes, their chances of obtaining desired outcomes increase substantially (Fullan, 2008b; Hock, 1999). Communication, understanding of the vision, and support from those above them are paramount in a principal’s being successful in increasing student achievement at their schools.

This study provides new insights into how a principal has strategized to obtain increased student achievement at his school. Although no two principalships are the same, and varying factors occur in every situation, the subject of the study has made progress at his given high school. With complex systems in high schools and the difficulties that come with increasing student achievement with economically disadvantaged populations, continuing to better understand how principals strategize in varying situations and what strategies work best for them in their school situations is vital to acquiring a better understanding of best leadership practices. The barriers this principal has faced and the strategies he used for achievement can be generalizable to other principals and will add to the understandings established in this review of the literature, or perhaps more interestingly, may contradict them in some way. Contradictions to the literature would also help establish understandings and perhaps add more questions as to why the principal was successful in this situation.

Table 1

*Conceptual Framework Graphic for Study*





## Summary

The beliefs principals carry into their jobs and the strategies they use to move their schools toward successful outcomes for students are major factors in their successes or failures at their jobs. Schools are social systems, and with human systems many complications can occur if principals do not strategize while looking at their organizations in a systematic way (Green, 2000; Schlechty, 2005). Dealing with systems can be quite complex work (Senge, 2006). Principals must learn to look systematically and balance these complexities to help them find positive outcomes for students (Fullan, 2008a).

This chapter explored the American educational system and the current system in Georgia, the beginnings of complexity theory and how it has evolved into the social sciences, systems thinking, how complexity theory has progressed into a useful theoretical platform for leadership and organizations, and the major role school culture plays in the success of principals. These major theories and the literature formed the theoretical basis for the research.

Chapter 3 will explain how the research site was chosen and how the theoretical basis described was used to collect and analyze the data from the research site to answer the research questions.

### III.

## METHODOLOGY

### Methods

This chapter addresses the methodology used in the study. The chapter is divided into sections that include: research design and rationale, foreshadowed problems, exploratory questions, research procedures, research setting, data collection, data analysis, further construction of the case study, threats to validity, and human participants and ethics precautions. The sections of methodology and research procedures both contain sub-sections where appropriate. The chapter then concludes with a summary.

After years of costly school improvement efforts, including the most recent \$400 million Georgia Race to The Top Grant, Georgia's high schools have failed to significantly improve school-wide student achievement. American schools have not shown significant gains in student achievement for some time. Even with costly governmental programs, significant growth for all students has not been achieved (Peterson, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). One major factor in the success of students is quality and distinctive school leadership (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Principals can be the difference between a successful school and one that does not show growth in student achievement (Fullan, 2008b).

The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant

improvements in student achievement. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, barriers the principal faced, and strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement. Studying what made exemplary principals successful can be a quality way to garner data that can be utilized by others. Lightfoot (1983) confirmed asking what is right with schools is the best way to transfer the positive aspects of schools to others. I chose to use a case study in which my case was the principal. In an attempt to understand the cultural aspects of the principal's relationship with the school's stakeholders, I spent a significant amount of time shadowing the principal as he carried out his day-to-day responsibilities. To further understand the principal's story and add perspective, I used a snowball sampling technique to recruit additional subjects who have worked with the principal and interviewed them about their work experiences (Bertaux, 1981; Patton, 2002).

The data collected answered the questions of what lived experiences the principal had, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used at the school to improve student achievement. These inquiries were the main research questions and primary focus of the study. Some initial sub-questions included direct strategies employed by the principal. I was curious to understand if the principal consciously thought and planned all of the direct strategies. Were some of the indirect strategies involuntary, or did they occur as byproducts of events put in motion by the principal?

The research questions used to guide this study were as follows:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement

efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified high-performing, Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

### Research Design and Rationale

Stake (1995) defined the case study as “the study of particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). The case I have chosen is complex and happens under important circumstances. The uniqueness of the case is what led me to a qualitative case study.

#### *Rationale for the Single-Case Study*

Holding a constructivist worldview and seeking to understand the lived experiences of the successful principal led me to take an inductive approach to the research. Stake (1995) believed a case can be of one school or one person. The importance of the study largely was to understand the principal, the strategies he used to help improve the school, and the human interactions that occurred for these strategies to succeed. The principal himself was the focus of this case study. Wolcott (1973) was one of the first to tackle an educational case study in this manner. His work, focused on one elementary school principal and culminated in his book. He believed to truly understand the workings of a complex human culture, one must ingrain themselves in the environment and stay close to the subject of the case, a more ethnographic approach than case study. The method Wolcott (1973) used, the participant-as-observer method, served

him well to gain multiple cultural insights by taking a deep look at the principal himself. Through both informal and formal interviews, observation, and access to school documents he deemed helpful, Wolcott (1973) takes the reader into the life of the principal and the life of the school. The interactions the principal had with teachers, staff, students, and parents provided deep insights into why the principal makes many of his decisions and studies the inner workings and hidden culture within the school itself. In an attempt to further analyze the principal and his decisions, the first principal interview was used to find three acquaintances of the principal who are familiar with the principal's work who would be willing to conduct one interview with the researcher. These interviews provided more data that gave insights to address the research questions. The perspectives of people who have worked for and with the principal added to the study by providing data that are not directly the principal's perspective or the researcher's interpretation.

#### *Foreshadowed Problems/Exploratory Questions*

Fullan (2008b) believed the job of the principal continued to become more complex. The reasons principals make decisions and strategize to move their schools in positive directions can be just as complicated. One foreshadowed problem addressed is the depth of understanding the researcher must acquire to make inferences about why the principal may have chosen one strategy over another. The potential issue will be addressed in the research design. There must be an element of trust established to allow for the principal to speak candidly and be honest about why he made certain decisions. In order to understand the complexities that go along with these decisions, the researcher

would need to spend an appropriate amount of time and allow for understandings to be established.

## Research Procedures

### *Research Setting*

Pseudonyms were used for both the school and the principal within the study to protect their identities. Elway High School, the chosen school in this case, saw recent success in increasing student achievement. Elway High School is the only high school in a small, rural Georgia county. In the 2015-2016 school year, Elway High had 15 teachers who served 241 students.

This county is one of the least populated in the state with a population of 4,034 (Georgia.gov, n.d.). The residents of this county predominately make their modest livings via small industrial and agricultural businesses. 91% of this county's high school students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Approximately 90% of the county's 414.9 square miles is still natural forest and is under the control of private companies, mainly associated with the timber industry (Georgia.gov, n.d.).

From 2014 to 2015, the CCRPI score for the school increased by 18 points. The feeder schools, one elementary and one middle, both had decreases in their CCRPI scores between 2014 and 2015. In the same time frame, the graduation rate at the high school increased 20.4 points, from 70.2% to 90.6%. There were also increases in many specific areas for standardized tests. The school increased Coordinate Algebra scores from a 20% rate of students scoring proficient or better, to a 44.3% rate of students scoring proficient or better. The data reflected positive student achievement gains. The principal of the

school has played a major role in the success. The methods and strategies he used to increase student achievement and the cultural changes to the organization under his leadership need to be closely examined and documented.

Under these circumstances, I chose the principal as my case. Stake (1995) elaborated “the case is a specific, a complex, a functioning thing” (p. 2). To understand the hidden elements of this story and how perhaps the underlying cultural elements helped to move this school from stagnant results to exemplar, it is key to understand the leader who began this organization’s journey. To comprehend the strategies, especially the indirect elements, it is also important to understand the thought process, the preexisting experiences, and the attitude behind the determination required to lead in complex and trying circumstances.

Another reason for my choice of principal and site stems from the contention that research centered on the exemplar example, especially in educational settings, can be most beneficial. Lightfoot (1983) explained “a prominent tradition of social science inquiry has been the uncovering of the malignancies and the search for their cures. This has been particularly true for researchers who are studying schools” (p. 10). She posited her belief that, to improve schools significantly, inquiry must focus on the good. By asking what is right, it is possible to find ways to transfer the good to other environments. This belief led to my focus on the exceptional principal in the identified school and his unique case. The principal and his strategies that moved the school to its current state are what led to my focus on the leader. School improvement, especially on the multiple fronts the school data reflect, is complex work for a leader. Senge (2006) and Fullan (2008b) both described how, in order to make improvements in complex environments,

leaders must embrace a systematic approach to problem solving.

#### Procedures for Recruitment/Participation

The research site was determined by a derived process. This process first included searching state data to determine which schools would fit the feasibility of the study. Second in the process was finding a principal who would agree to subject himself to my inquiry and was willing to take the time required to be the subject of the study. To begin the process, I accessed the current CCRPI scores for Title I schools in the state of Georgia. The most up-to-date scores at the time were the 2014 results; however, the 2015 results were released during the process of searching for a research site. When they were released, I then began using these results as they gave a more updated and accurate reflection of where the schools would be. The top 10 Title I schools in the state were then determined based on these scores. The CCRPI scores were used because they reflect a broader range of data than specific test scores or graduation rates, and already combine these and other data points to determine the score.

The research site, Elway High School, and the principal, Doug Rainey, were selected for numerous reasons. First, the school fit into the category of being one of the top five Title I schools in the state based on CCRPI score. Elway ranked fourth in the 2015 scores. Second, the principal, Doug Rainey, has been at the school for an extended period of time. His tenure is important because it would have given the principal time to implement his plans/processes for student achievement. Third, the principal responded to my inquiries about helping with my study and was willing for me to intrude on both his school and time.

After deciding the principal and the high school data fit my criteria, I contacted



him by e-mail. Mr. Rainey responded to my e-mail and agreed to speak with me over the phone as a face-to-face meeting was not conducive to our schedules at the time. By phone, Mr. Rainey and I discussed my interest in him and the school, and he agreed to allow me to conduct my research, pending approval by his superintendent. The principal contacted me to confirm the superintendent approved the request for research and later provided a written letter from the superintendent giving the researcher permission in writing to conduct research in the school district.

Before the current research site was selected, other research sites and principals were eliminated for the following reasons. The first research site considered appeared to fit the criteria desired. Ultimately, the superintendent at this site did not approve the research. The second research site also appeared to be a very good fit. Unfortunately, after much deliberation, it was determined by the research committee the site should not be used. The site was a charter school that worked under a national model, which would have provided specific training to the principal and may have affected his strategic choices for the school. This could have possibly limited the choices for him and skewed the data generated from the study.

The stringent selection methods used for the site and the principal ensured the data collected was not limited or biased. However, my involvement in education and school improvement led to natural biases I have derived over my tenure in education. Subjectivity was a primary focus and may have served as a limitation in my study if not addressed properly.

Teacher participants were recruited using snowball method. In the first interview with the principal, he was used as a source to locate participants who would fit the

criteria outlined. The criteria included people who had previously worked with or for the principal but who were no longer under the principal's direct supervision. In the first interview, Mr. Rainey noted that he had formally been in charge of the K-12 school and that elementary school teachers were still present at the elementary school who worked under him in that capacity. Mr. Rainey further contacted these teachers to inquire about their interest in participating in the study. Three teachers volunteered for participation.

Maxwell (2013) shared the belief that most qualitative researchers "must try and address most validity threats after the research has begun, using evidence collected during the research itself" (p. 123). The qualitative researcher can, however, anticipate many of the limitations the researcher may encounter and better prepare ways to address and rule out potential threats.

#### Data Collection

My 18 years of experience in education at the secondary level are what led me to this study. During this time, I have been a classroom teacher, a coordinator of a ninth-grade transition program, a graduation coach, and an administrator. I have worked for various principals and seen differing forms of leadership. Most recently as a high school administrator, I have participated in many school improvement efforts. My experiences formed my beliefs about what constitutes good school leadership and what strategies should be used to improve student achievement in schools. I have seen first-hand the struggles that come with the job of the principal. I understand it is not a job for the faint of heart, and those who are successful have not only a keen understanding of school and learning, but also a keen understanding of people and how to read and motivate them.

As to the main data collection instrument in the study, my goal was to understand the biases I have. I will never remove my life experiences and how they have formed me, but I recognized and documented when the experiences I held attempted to discolor the truths and understandings I sought from my research participant and site.

### *Interviews*

There was a series of interviews with the principal of the identified school. Siedman's (2013) three-interview series technique was utilized as a basis to conduct multiple interviews using questions drawn from Fullan (2001, 2008a, 2008b), Alkire (1995), Burns (2002), Dufour and Matos (2013), and other literature outlined in the literature review. Although this was the basis, to delve as deeply as possible, slight deviations to this technique were added. The recommended time restraints of 90-minute interviews were sustained, as well as the thematic structure for the interviews. However, Siedman (2013) stated the series "allows both the interviewer and the participant to explore the participant's experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning" (p. 20). The data gathered from these interviews were crucial for establishing how the principal established a vision, planned out school change, and then tweaked these plans and efforts into actual strategies to improve student achievement. These data served as the basis of the information needed to answer all research questions.

From information garnered in the first interview with the principal, the snowball sampling technique was utilized to identify acquaintances of the principal who are familiar with the principal's work. Three of these acquaintances were interviewed one time each to help provide more data to understand the case. The criteria for these interviewees was people who worked with the principal for multiple years, with the

exception of those people who currently work for the principal. The most sought-after candidates were those who worked the closest with the principal, including those who served in leadership roles either as a colleague or direct report to the principal. These candidates shared unique perspectives pertaining to the experiences of, the barriers faced by, and the strategies implemented by the principal.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored as Word computer files. I transcribed the interviews myself, as the practice benefited me in the data analysis process. As a basis for transcribing, a set of rules to guide the transcription process was incorporated (Kvale, 1996; Siedman, 2013). The rules were developed using a guide provided by Mergenthaler and Stinson (1992). My goal for transcriptions was to create a document that provided a careful re-creation of the interview itself and reflected the true essence of the interview on my paper. In doing so I:

- 1) Chose to keep word forms from the commentaries and in situations where there was not common meaning or spelling I translated as closely as I could to common written speech.
- 2) Chose to preserve the naturalness of the interview by using a text format which would resemble a play script.
- 3) Transcribed as closely to verbatim as possible throughout and did not prematurely reduce the text of the interviews to provide as detailed of an interview reproduction as possible.
- 4) I included non-verbal commentary when I deemed this important to the context of the interview. Examples could include a pause in speech or a laugh.
- 5) I used 12-point, Times New Roman font and double-spaced the transcriptions to

provide room for notations and highlighting of text while analyzing.

Based on Siedman (2013), the series of interviews was conducted before I began the process of analyzing the data. However, between interviews I did begin transcribing the initial interviews and used any natural assumptions acquired from previous interviews to provide clarifying questions in subsequent interviews. Siedman (2013) explained he commonly used this practice to look at the whole picture when searching for themes.

### *Observations and Field Notes*

The design of the ethnographic principles in the field notes of a case study was derived from a study conducted by Sharif-Chan, Tankala, Leong, Austin, and Battistella (2016). Within their case study, they used observational field notes to describe the social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions of participants, and these data were then combined with interview transcript data for analysis. According to Patton (2002), “for ethnographers, the field is a cultural setting” (p. 262). This case study incorporated elements of an ethnographic study in many ways. To delve deeply into the strategies the principal has incorporated to improve student achievement, I strove to understand the cultural context of the building and how the principal may have used the culture or the hidden understandings within the building to incorporate these strategies. Patton (2002) goes on to describe the many advantages to proper field work. These include placing oneself as the researcher in situations where understandings can occur that may be routine and mundane to the participants because they are embedded in the culture of the building. Finding these situations was one of my goals for conducting field work, to see things that may have been overlooked in the interview process. Second, Patton (2002) described discovering things participants may be unwilling to talk about in interviews as

an advantage to field work. This cross-check rendered results, as seeing how the principal reacted with his staff and documenting these interactions helped establish understandings that were not directly talked about in the interview process.

During these observations, I served as a “participant-as-observer” (Patton, 2002; Wolcott 1973). Wolcott (1973) described being a “participant-as-observer” when describing his participation as an outsider who participated at times (bringing a gift to the school Christmas party) but predominately as an observer. Gold (1958) established this role and described it as being an observer in a setting where everyone around knows the researcher has the role as a “scientific observer”. In this role, the researcher participates predominately by his or her presence in setting alone. It is understood in this role the observer may find almost no opportunities to participate, but the opportunities to observe and take notes on these observations are limited only by the endurance of the researcher.

With this understanding, gaining personal perspective into how the principal interacts with his staff and students provided more data into why the strategies implemented by the principal were successful. By observation, the researcher saw and documented how the principal handled the implementation of strategies with his staff and what steps he took to ensure these strategies were being carried out in the building by staff. Understanding how the principal handled individual interactions with staff for strategy implementation provided valuable data to determine how the principal indirectly affected the implementation of strategies that assisted in the student achievement gains at the school.

Observational field notes assisted the researcher in gaining the clearest possible picture about how the principal interacted with those around him and implemented his

strategies to the stakeholders throughout the school. The researcher used Patton's (2002) guidelines for taking meaningful field notes. Patton (2002) stated field notes should be as "descriptive, concrete, and detailed" as possible (p. 303). Accordingly, my field notes focused on how the principal interacted with others and included quotations or close approximations of what people said, my experience of the research setting, and finally my insights garnered while in the field. The field notes were dated, and times of the observation were also noted within. Once field notes were complete for the day, memos were written from the notes to establish clarity and to begin to form assertions from the notes.

### *School Documents*

The collection of school documents contributed to the researcher's understanding the complete picture of the principal himself, his relationships with those in the school, and the methods he undertook when implementing his strategies. Wolcott (1973), while conducting his case study of an individual principal, believed "one customarily draws upon additional sources and research techniques to provide supportive data of a more systematic nature about specific aspects of the fieldwork" (p. 8).

Historical and current school documents were evaluated and utilized to analyze the change in both the student achievement and the culture of the school, as well as to help my understanding of how the principal communicated his plans/processes to all school stakeholders. Sources included the school improvement plan, school achievement data, and public communications from the principal to both the staff and parents, all being subject to what the principal was comfortable in sharing with me.

The large amount of data collected by using school documents can help to establish connections between the principal's strategies and how he communicated them to the greater school organization and the general public. School achievement data also helped to establish the positive gains in student achievement the school has had, backing up the researcher's decision to use the particular school and principal in the study. Also, by questioning the principal, the researcher inquired as to what actual data the principal believed were the most important. The data the principal used were an important look into how the principal strategized for school improvement.

## Data Analysis

### *Interviews*

The transcripts from the interviews conducted were systematically analyzed using a case study method derived by Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, and Casey (2015). Their method combined strategies from Miles and Huberman (1994) and principles outlined by Morse (1994). Stake (1995) asserted, "For most important data, it will be useful to use pre-established codes but to go through the data separately looking for new ones" (p. 79). Focusing on the study's research questions, I first read through the transcripts and applied In Vivo coding (Saldana, 2016).

The second step in transcript analysis included another thorough review of the transcripts in which a pattern code was applied. The purpose of the pattern coding was to revisit the data reflected under the In Vivo codes and find patterns in the data. When patterns were established from the In Vivo codes, they were then condensed into groups of pattern codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to this step as one of the best ways



to make sense out of the data. When these categorical codes were established, the researcher wrote memos on all of the existing themes that had emerged.

These memos then led directly into the third step of analysis. In step three, the researcher wrote memos to analyze the connections between themes, which assisted the researcher in making sense of the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to this step as “distilling and ordering” or testing the memos or executive summary statements from stage two.

### *Observations and Field Notes*

According to Patton (2002), “Raw field notes and verbatim transcripts constitute the undigested complexity of reality. Simplifying and making sense out of that complexity constitutes the challenge of content analysis” (p. 463). Data from observations and field notes taken while at the school site and their accompanying memos were analyzed by the same process as the interview transcripts. I began the process by writing memos from my daily field notes. I then added these memos to interview transcripts and used In Vivo coding as an initial step. I then pattern coded the data and wrote memos on each of the themes that had been combined with transcript data, both pre-existing and any new codes that resulted from pattern coding. Thirdly, these executive summaries were then used to write memos on connections within the themes. These memos were used by the researcher to sort and clarify the data.

The field notes established through these observations gave insight into the principal’s interactions with staff and students when incorporating his established strategies for student achievement. They also provided further insight to how these interactions affected the overall success of strategy implementation.

### *School Documents*

Student achievement data from historical school documents were initially used to establish the researcher's choice of the particular school and principal. The data showed significant gains in student achievement since the time principal took over as the school's leader.

Wolcott (1973) contended, "One customarily draws upon additional sources and research techniques to provide supportive data of a more systematic nature about specific aspects of the fieldwork" (p. 8). To ensure I was getting the full picture of my case, I systematically collected and then analyzed school documents as they were available to me. These documents went through the same analysis process as both the interview transcripts and the memos from field notes. School documents played a vital role in confirming both statements made by the principal and observations documented in the field notes. Primarily, they served to confirm and potentially add to the themes that were determined through the other data collection methods.

### Further Construction of the Case Study

Once the majority of the data was collected and analyzed by the researcher, the data were then further condensed and edited into a more manageable file. This constituted the final step in the analysis process established by Houghton, et al. (2015). The step, "developing propositions," is a way to formalize the data into a "coherent set of explanations" (Houghton et al., 2015, p. 10). The combined memos from step three in the analysis process were used to develop final themes which explained the phenomena of the case. The final narrative reflects a holistic portrayal of the principal and how the

principal made strategic decisions which impacted student achievement at his school (Patton, 2002).

A story and rich description of the environment and the principal may help the reader to transfer this study's results to similar contexts. This required sequencing the events that have transpired as the principal has led the school with an emphasis on time and place. By focusing on the individual principal, his experiences, barriers faced, and the strategies he used, the data collected may transfer to situations where similar leadership styles and strategies could be used by others (Stake, 1995).

#### Threats to Validity

I have worked in a high school environment for the last 18 years. I have witnessed many change efforts implemented over this time and have been personally involved in executing changes within schools. Being so familiar with high schools and having strong views about what works and what does not could have been a challenge for me in this setting. I needed to see familiar things for the first time. When part of a culture, the challenge of the researcher becomes finding enough separation to see things anew (Erickson, 1984). Erickson (1984) is credited with coining the belief that the central task of the anthropologist is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. In cultural anthropology, this is the job of the ethnographer as well. In my setting, my job and challenge were to make the familiar strange. In attempting to find the complex strategies being used by the principal, although conducting a case study, I looked at this through an ethnographer's eyes. The researcher sought to understand the culture of the school and how humans fit together within interrelationships. These understandings played a

significant role in finding the hidden elements and the indirect strategies that made the principal and the organization as a whole capable of substantial innovative growth.

In making the familiar strange in my chosen setting, subjectivity and my recognition of it were paramount at all phases of the research process. Peshkin (1988) confirmed the researcher must get to know his subjectivity and must do this by recognizing times this subjectivity may occur. The researcher can recognize these times by his or her own feelings, premonitions, and encounters. When one feels moved, angry, offended, or elated, it would be a sign the subjective self was coming to the forefront. Peshkin (1988) contended the researcher's subjectivity "is like a garment that cannot be removed" (p. 17).

Peshkin (1988) also referred to the "subjective I," which is the researcher's recognition of times of subjectivity. The researcher may document this recognition to ensure the decisions made address these deep beliefs. Going into my research, I was aware of existing "subjective I's" I encountered and worked through.

As previously stated, my "subjective I's" focused on both my beliefs about instructional strategies that helped student progress and about complexity and how one must strategize in complex environments such as secondary schools. As someone who was somewhat familiar with the environment in my chosen research setting, I documented any time I had biased feelings around my "subjective I's" to ensure I was giving the best description I could of the research site. The data I garnered played an important role in my growth as an educational leader and could help others who seek to lead educational institutions. If I attempted to be objective, it would mean failure on my part because it would have taken me, the research tool, out of the research. Erickson

(1984) may have expressed this best by stating “. . . the method is not that of objectivity, but of disciplined subjectivity” (p. 58).

Reactivity should always be a concern for those conducting interviews in qualitative research. The interviewer and the interview setting can play a major factor in what informants may say and how they may react in an interview (Maxwell, 2013). With this understanding, I attempted to mediate the chance of reactivity by following Siedman’s (2013) suggestions, which included being a good listener, asking open-ended questions, or asking the subject to tell a story about his experiences.

One of the major ways I combated threats to validity was following a stringent process to ensure the collection of rich data. Siedman’s (2013) three-part interview, and the time spent within the process of observing and taking field notes, helped ensure there was depth to the data collected.

Saldana (2016) suggested addressing issues of trustworthiness by following some basic procedures. These included coding while transcribing interviews, using journals and memos, and checking with the participants themselves when questions arise. To begin the process of outlining lines of importance within the text and my process of In Vivo coding, a right-hand column was kept as I transcribed the interviews. Within my outlined analysis procedures, I also used numerous memos that began in the observations and field work, which was completed in the data gathering process. I followed Siedman’s (2013) three-part interview process to allow numerous opportunities to check with my participant for further clarity on questions arising throughout the process. I checked back with the participant when clarity was needed during the analysis process. Triangulation of data collection methods was also beneficial to ensuring trustworthy data. Interview data

were cross-referenced with observation data and documents collected to gain a full picture of the case.

Stake (1995) had a great deal to say about how a case can be generalized to the greater population. However, he argued “the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (p. 8). He stated the main objective with case study is to understand the case itself, and if researchers do this well enough, others may also be able to garner truths from their emphasis. The first way I have worked to ensure transferability within the case was the selection of the participant and site for the research. The case I chose is unique. Few Title I schools in the state have made such significant gains in student achievement, and questions asked, including the experiences of the principal, the barriers he faced, and the strategies he used to help the increase in student achievement, could transfer well to other principals and those who train them. Another way to ensure transferability is with “thick description” (Denzin, 2001). Patton (2002) elaborated these types of deep descriptions can help scholars “understand the phenomenon studied and draw our own interpretations about meanings and significance” (p. 438). My goal was to use such descriptions to describe the case and therefore allow for the transfer of interpretations to others.

To ensure dependability in the study, data sources were triangulated. These included interview data, observational data, and documents from the research site. These sources were brought together to provide a full picture of the case. Patton (2002) also advocated comparing what people say in public to what they say in private, which was possible by interviewing the subject and observing the subject with others. The data

collection and analysis processes were also subject to review of the dissertation committee, which helped to ensure the quality of the methods used within the study.

A further limitation to the study could include the recruitment of teacher participants. The principal was used through the snowball technique to recommend people he had worked with in the past who were no longer under his supervision. Without including the principal in this process, it would have made it very difficult for the researcher to determine and target people who fit the criteria. However, using the principal suggestions in recruitment also could have provided the opportunity for the principal to only include those he had positive relationships with and to exclude others.

#### Human Participants and Ethics Precautions

In accordance with the guidelines of Valdosta State University (VSU) regarding the protection of human participants, a request for a review was submitted to the VSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) to interview one participant for this study (see Appendix A), as well as snowball interview participants. I was careful to protect any personal information deemed confidential. Thus, personal records for any student could not be used. Pseudonyms were also assigned to protect participants from anything detrimental or harmful.

In an effort to maintain strict research confidentiality, the consent statement (Appendix A) was read before interviews commenced, and participants were required to give verbal consent to participate in this study. The protections and potential risks that may be encountered while participating in the study were carefully explained. All data associated with this study were collected solely by the researcher and stored on a specific flash drive that was backed up by an external hard drive. The flash drive and hard drive

were only in the possession of the researcher and password protected to maximize confidentiality. After transcripts were created, all digital interview data were deleted. Before interviews, all participants were read a consent statement on record, and this consent was reflected in the transcript of the interview. After completion of the study, data were maintained and protected by the researcher in a locked cabinet for three years. After three years, the data were appropriately deleted and/or shredded to ensure the protection of all participants.

Although the researcher was very much dependent on the participation of the subject of the study and the given research site, an early withdrawal from the study for any reason, foreseen or otherwise, would have in no way been allowed to adversely affect the subject of the study or the research site. The researcher would have been forced to re-evaluate the nature of the study or the research site, and all protections previously given to the subject and the research site would have continued to be given after withdrawal. However, the subject did see the research through, and the researcher was able to collect all data as planned.

### Summary

In this study, I analyzed a high-performing, Georgia Title I high school principal who has participated in Georgia's school improvement efforts and has made significant strides in student achievement. I also determined the lived experiences of the principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving student achievement. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select one high school principal who had increased student achievement at his given school. Siedman's (2013) three-series interview protocols, review documents and



artifacts, and non-participant observations were used to collect data. For data analysis, I utilized strategies from Miles and Huberman (1994) and principles outlined by Morse (1994) that focused on getting to the life/leadership experiences of the principal. Additionally, constant comparative analysis methodology was used that focused on comparing and contrasting the interview transcripts. The documents, and artifacts consistently. Member checking and the three interview series processes were used to check for validity (Patton, 2002; Siedman, 2013). More important, the privacy of participants was protected through the use of pseudonyms and by following the guidelines of Valdosta State University's IRB.

I understood the meaning behind Stake's (1995) contention this is "highly personal research. Persons studied are studied in depth" (p. 135). The principal studied trusted me with his personal thoughts and beliefs within the study, and I understood as the researcher the need to respect this trust. Stake (1995) also recognized the case itself, and especially the way the researcher interacts with it, is often unique into itself and cannot be reproduced because of these unique circumstances surrounding any particular case. This uniqueness is what I found compelling about the case study because this brought on an especially important challenge when one believes the events transpiring, the case itself, is vitally important. It must be accurate, and credence must be given to this importance.

With interviews, strategic observations, field work, and the use of school documents, I painted a picture of the principal at this high school and the strategies that he has employed to increase student achievement at the school. By using the data collected, I attempted to garner the lengths the principal went to while implementing

these strategies. What were his greatest struggles? What were his best days? What role did culture play in these strategies, and how did he directly and indirectly affect the enigma school culture often is? All of these questions played an important role in the overall understanding of the case.

Stake (1995) stated the case study is:

. . . an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make, even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish. The case study ahead is a splendid palette.” (p. 136)

#### IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to analyze a high-performing, Georgia Title I high school principal who has participated in school improvement efforts at his assigned Title I high school where student achievement has improved significantly under his leadership. The purpose of the study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement. The participating principal has led his school through many initiatives that have helped improve student achievement results, including raising the graduation rate to 96%. In this chapter, I present a detailed narrative about Doug Rainey and his experiences as principal. The findings addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified high-performing, Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling procedures to select the research site and the principal who was the main subject of the study. Teachers who formerly worked with the principal were selected by using the snowball technique, in which the principal recommended these participants in the first interview. Data were collected through six interviews, three with the principal of the selected high school, and one interview each with teachers who had formerly worked with the principal. Further data were collected via non-participant observations of the principal performing his daily roles and responsibilities at his work. Additionally, school documents were reviewed to get a more holistic view of life at this school. These documents included agenda items for meetings and copies of school data and other information that the principal presented to stakeholders.

The researcher analyzed the case study data using a method created by Houghton, et al. (2015), which combined strategies by Miles and Huberman (1994) and principles outlined by Morse (1994). This strategy involved initial transcription of all interview data and compiling memos from all field notes taken. I read through and coded interview transcripts and memos from field notes using a first round In Vivo coding method. After establishing first round In Vivo codes, the researcher used pattern coding to establish second round codes, which began to establish themes from the data. From pattern coding, I wrote memos to help me integrate all data from the various sources (interviews, documents, field notes) into more succinct and final themes.

This chapter introduces the principal who participated in this study under the pseudonym Doug Rainey. The researcher established a coding system to establish pseudonyms and used names that were significant to him within the codes. State of

Georgia CCRPI results from 2015 were used to establish the top five Title I high schools. The selected school was in this top-five category. The researcher then contacted the principal to gain background information and acquire the needed approvals to conduct research at the site. The principal was willing to take the time needed for the study and open to having the researcher on site while conducting research. The researcher transcribed interviews verbatim and took field notes over the course of two days of observations. Pseudonyms are used for the research site itself and all other participants in the study. The principal profile is provided in this chapter; teacher profiles will be discussed in chapter 5.

#### The Principal's School

##### *Elway High School*

Elway High School is a small rural school and the only high school in the district. The high school serves one of the least populated counties in the state of Georgia. Most of the county's land is forested or wetlands. Ninety-one percent of this county's high school students are eligible for free and reduced lunch ("Downloadable Data", n.d.).

When asked about how important the school was to the community, the principal did not hesitate in explaining: "Oh, it's everything to this community. It's all the community has. It's a stop light and a library and here, the school." This is consistent with Miller's (1995) notion of the central roles of schools in their communities and how they serve as cultural centers in the community. The school being the center of the community, however, can also be challenging for the leader of the school who is subject to a great deal of scrutiny.

The community Elway serves is unique. Participants identified understanding the

community and its past as vital for any school leader who anticipated implementing change efforts at the school. The finding supports Vidich and Bensman's (2000) contention that small communities have traditionally resisted change and challenges to practice. One teacher expressed that, in the past, the community and the school itself "has been closed off to people that are not from the area." Another teacher described the small system as sometimes having to endure small town politics with the school. The fact only one high school is supervised by the board of education means there could be more scrutiny placed on the high school. The board takes a strong interest in all things going on at the school.

Elway is a community that cares a great deal about its school and its students. The researcher observed a community meeting to which the principal was invited. This meeting resembled Miller's (1995) Community Development Partnership (CDP) model. This model was originated to assist with the capacity for community development by using local school district assets, such as facilities, and human capacity from the school district, such as students and teachers. The participation of students imparted the opportunity for young people to work in company with adults to gain skills and aptitude for prosperous citizen involvement (Miller, 1995).

Numerous school district personnel were present, including Mr. Rainey and the principal of the K-8 school; the superintendent, assistant principals, and counselors; and student representatives from the high school. During the meeting, the group made fiscal decisions about programs the organization would invest in for the coming year. I saw a presentation from the School Resource Officer, a sheriff's department deputy, about a program that would provide resources for anti-drug information. There was then a

presentation from an organization focused on preventing teenage pregnancy. From the various facets of the community represented at the meeting, it appeared the community wanted to provide as many opportunities as possible for the students at Elway.

The principal also noted the current board and superintendent make decisions based on the needs of the students. The researcher also had the opportunity to attend a meeting of the board of education and observed the support the board has for the superintendent and the two current principals in the system. While at the board meeting, Mr. Rainey and the K-8 principal presented the past year's student achievement data to the board. They both also gave the board updates on what was occurring at their schools. The superintendent then commented about each school's data to the board of education. He publicly congratulated Mr. Rainey on his outstanding progress in student achievement at the high school.

Based on my observations of the school, I could infer how the school's stakeholders cared deeply about the school and the students. Every participant reported on the relationships established within the school, both collegially and with students and the community. In the meeting, the board gave the opportunity for public stakeholders to speak. This portion of the meeting was called "public comment". One comment came from a woman who was not at the meeting but had spoken to the superintendent prior to this meeting. She complained the school landscape was being neglected and in need of major attention to make it more presentable. The superintendent agreed, and a plan was put in place to improve the school's appearance. This example demonstrates the importance of small details, such as landscaping, to a small rural community.

## The Principal's Story

### *Principal Doug Rainey*

Mr. Rainey was born in Pennsylvania and raised in New York City, a long way from Elway High School, both physically and culturally. The son of a church minister, he described the schools he attended as great. He regretted not taking advantage of the many opportunities these educational institutions offered him. He admitted, "Education was not something I valued." However, he persisted and ultimately became a high school graduate. From our conversations, I can connect how his experiences in school played a role in driving him to improve students' experiences at Elway. Mr. Rainey admitted that, as a student, he was never very engaged. During my fieldwork at the school, I witnessed his efforts to ensure the students were engaged individually by getting to know them personally and regularly checking in with them.

After graduation, Mr. Rainey found employment in the fine dining industry for several years. Then in 1994, he decided to go back to a four-year school and, being a church minister's son, attended a Bible college in Arizona. After marrying his wife, he moved to North Florida in a position as a youth minister but was not satisfied with his career choice. He stated, "Despite my best efforts not to get into ministry, I did get into ministry a little bit voluntarily, and working with kids, I did see how high school was a good fit and wanted to work in high schools." He found himself back in college, this time as an education major. He taught for a short stint in Florida and then found employment at Elway High School, teaching both middle and high school. During his first five years, he was working towards his Master's in Educational Leadership. After earning his degree, he became an assistant principal at Elway. A few years later, in 2010, his principal



was called up mid-year to be superintendent. Mr. Rainey explained, “So after five years, I became an assistant principal. The principal and I developed a really good relationship; he poured into me a little bit, and by 2010 they moved him up to be superintendent in the middle of the year and moved me to be the principal for the rest of the year interim wise.” They offered Mr. Rainey the principal’s job at the end of the year, and he was re-hired as the principal of the K-12 school. As the district and his job developed, the system eventually, in 2013, divided the school into two, a K-8 school and a 9-12 school. Mr. Rainey became the principal of the new high school.

The state of Georgia began using an evaluation system to grade schools in 2012. At this time, the Career and College Readiness Index or CCRPI was put in place by the state. Elway High School has made steady increases in its CCRPI score under Mr. Rainey’s tenure as the school’s principal. Over the same period, the elementary and middle school scores have fluctuated. The graduation rate has risen from 70% to 96% over his tenure as principal of the high school. There have also been significant gains in state test scores. All these gains occurred in a school where 91% of students receive free and reduced lunch, which is the main statistic used to determine schools who are eligible to receive Title I federal funds. Under Mr. Rainey’s leadership, Elway High School has ranked in the top five of Title I schools in CCRPI scores in both 2015 and 2016 (“College and Career Ready Performance Index”, 2017; “Downloadable Data”, 2017).

In addition to being principal at Elway, Mr. Rainey has also assumed additional responsibilities, including being the curriculum director for the high school and the CTAE director for the entire district. He is also responsible for student discipline, while many high school principals may not be directly involved in the process. As curriculum

director, he oversaw the vetting of curriculum for each subject area, facilitated the content being taught to standards, and assured teacher units matched course standards and requirements. Mr. Rainey believes this is an important aspect of his job and stressed this should be his responsibility as instructional leader of the school. He stated, “I enjoy that, and I think that it is important because that is one of the biggest keys, just keeping up with the curriculum and instruction piece.” Mr. Rainey believes instruction and classroom rigor play a vital role in student achievement and how one of the central roles of any principal would be the instructional leadership role. In his role as instructional leader, he helps teachers and department chairs vet curriculum, observes and evaluates all teachers at the school, and reviews lesson and instructional plans with teachers. For him, classroom rigor means students are constantly being engaged and challenged in their classes.

As the CTAE director for the district, Mr. Rainey is tasked with developing how the middle school supports the high school with its class offerings. He also completed budgeting for CTAE for the entire system, kept up with state requirements for CTAE pathways, and oversaw high school students taking state end-of-pathway classes in courses such as agriculture and culinary arts.

Mr. Rainey utilizes a servant leadership style. Spears (2004) identified characteristics of servant leadership to include listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Spears (2004) stated that listening and the ability to reflect on what they have heard as vital for the growth of servant leaders. Mr. Rainey demonstrated strong listening skills during interactions with the various stakeholders at the school. I observed him

make time to hear teachers' concerns. More significantly, he followed through with action showing how seriously he took these issues. In one incident, a teacher expressed a need for a classroom resource; he responded by immediately getting the teacher what he needed.

Mr. Rainey used empathy to create bonds of trust that enabled him to gain insights into how his teachers and students felt about issues pertaining to teaching and learning. Using empathy can help leaders understand how or why others are reacting to situations; it sharpens our "people acumen" and informs our decisions (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2016). It is the capacity to recognize the concerns other people have. Empathy means "the ability to share another's internal world of thoughts and feelings" (Walter, 2012, p. 9). Mr. Rainey was observed displaying empathy in a conference he conducted with a student and parent. He strove to understand what the student and parent were feeling since the student was not successful in school. They worked collaboratively to develop viable solutions.

Tjan (2012) identified self-awareness as an important trait in leadership. He argued the more leaders can become aware of their own motivation and how they go about making decisions, the more effective they become. Spears (2004) observed how awareness with great leaders does not always comfort them, but it often is what drives them to action and is what disturbs them enough to make bold moves. When leaders become aware of their own faults, the desire to prevent failure from occurring and uneasiness which stems from self-reflection may often be the driving force for them to attack these weaknesses head on. Mr. Rainey admitted instruction was not something he was completely comfortable with when he took the job as principal. He had been in the

classroom for only five years, and now he was tasked with leading more experienced teachers and improving their classroom practices. The data indicated Mr. Rainey spent most of his resources for professional learning. This area also takes a great deal of his time. His efforts to continue to grow as an instructional leader and the time he spent working with others on this task may have directly contributed to the school's growth in student achievement.

Morgan (2010) posited most of the communication leaders do is and should be persuasion. He contended great leaders persuade people to work together, to put personal interests aside, and to find common goals. Mr. Rainey put a great deal of thought into how he communicated with staff, students, and parents. He spoke to specific individuals, asked questions to gain knowledge, and stated specific goals to keep teachers focused. Persuasion in the servant leadership context is more about convincing others, not coercing them (Spears, 2004).

Mr. Rainey considered a leadership skill he possessed to be the ability to "see the ramifications of doing things." Spears (2004) contended a strong characteristic of a servant leader is foresight, or the ability to understand the past, the truths of the present, and then calculate the outcomes a decision may carry. Slaughter (1995) expressed how leaders must obtain foresight in order not to steer into the future blindly, without understanding the consequences associated with action or inaction. Mr. Rainey described many times how he employed this skill but homed in on class sequencing. When he decided to advance a group of students in a science sequence, he knew how the decision would negatively impact his End-of-Course scores and by fault his CCRPI score. He also knew the decision was the best one for that group of students. He explained that he knew

the importance of “understanding the fallout of a decision and not being afraid to do what’s best for kids.” He explained that school leaders must face these choices, but they need to understand what the probable outcomes of these decisions are. When leaders understand the probably outcomes, they can then anticipate the best ways to explain their decisions to stakeholders.

Spears (2004) believed an important trait of servant leaders is their ability to see the value in their employees beyond their day-to-day contributions to the organization. He stated that servant leaders are committed to the growth of people, and they show this commitment in numerous ways, such as supporting them in their personal and professional goals for growth. Welch and Byrne (2001) contended it is aspiring leaders’ jobs to grow themselves, but as a leader, the main task lies in growing those around that leader. The data showed Mr. Rainey strove to develop leaders within his team, and the relationships he developed with teachers helped him to find and steer their growth both personally and professionally. One example in the data is when Mr. Rainey first took the job of principal and needed a leader at the high school. He recruited a Spanish teacher who had leadership potential to fill the position of dean of students. This both helped the organization itself, as well as tapped into the personal growth of the teacher. Another teacher expressed how she came to Mr. Rainey when she was frustrated with where she was in her career. She explained he helped steer her towards advancing to a position they both believed suited her skill-set. Whether it was challenging groups of teachers to change practices in order to meet greater student achievement results or taking time with individuals to help them grow as leaders, the data showed Mr. Rainey initiated organizational growth by investing in the growth of those around him.

Spears (2004) contended that leaders should focus on building community within their organizations. Building community in schools is far from a new concept. For school leaders, this can very well be related to building the overall culture of the school. Sizer (2004) stressed that teachers will be the ultimate influence for students, good or bad. Deal (1990) believed “the core problems of schools are more spiritual than technical” (p. 12). Building a community of leaders, teachers, students, and parents who are all working for the success of students is challenging and complex (Fullan, 2003). The data showed Mr. Rainey attempted to build on the community of the school in numerous ways. His first goal was encouraging the building of relationships by implementing programs such as the Teachers as Advisors Program. This program connects students with a mentor teacher who communicates with them on a weekly basis about school-based goals.

#### Discussion of Themes

Transcripts from interviews, memos from field notes taken during observations, and school documents were combined and systematically analyzed using a case study analysis method derived from Houghton, et al. (2015). Their method combines strategies from Miles and Huberman (1994) and principles outlined by Morse (1994). The first step included a thorough reading and In Vivo coding of all documents, which can be viewed in Table 2. A second layer of pattern coding was then done on the In Vivo coding to form themes from the data. Examples of these codes can be found in Table 3. Memos were then systematically written for each theme derived from pattern coding, which included the topics of vision, relationships /communication, rigor/instructional practice, and barriers. These memos helped to streamline and incorporate the data from all sources.

Table 2

*In Vivo Coding Examples*

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1—they have your back

10—what can I help you with

20—more of a why not kind of person

31—a collegial type of trust and respect that goes on

40—high percentage of the migrant and the non-English speakers

50—when you don't feel like you are supported by the person over you, you don't care about doing the best job

60—he is very understanding

70—many times he walks with them to lunch

80—if your teachers are happy, they are happy to do what you want them to

90—he would explain why it had to be this way, and a lot of times that is really all teachers want to know

110—keeping the teacher morale up

120—I learned relational things

130—I don't walk around with the stress on my sleeves with the staff and the students

140—maintain a relationship with the superintendent where I am getting mentored

150—vision leaks every six weeks

168—understanding the fallout of a decision and not being afraid to do what's best for kids

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The In Vivo codes were developed through thorough reading and re-reading of the text of transcripts, memos from field notes, and school documents. Texts that stood out as having significant meaning to the researcher were highlighted and then identified and coded as seen in Table 2. In step two of the process, these codes were read and re-read until patterns in speech and text could be developed. Pattern coding was used for this process, and Table 3 gives an example of the second tier codes developed.



Table 3 *Pattern Code Examples*

<b>Vision</b>	<b>Relationships / Communication</b>	<b>Rigor / Instructional Practice</b>	<b>Barriers</b>
17—wants to be a better school	1—they have your back	64—looking at data	33—very closed off to people who are not from this area
18—going to look for things we are doing right	2—want what is best for you	91—he always wanted curriculum to be rigorous	38—overcoming some of those old mindsets
45—first and foremost it is about the kids	3—good communicators	100—I think technology	39—tremendous problem of getting parents involved here
51—strong leadership is very important to the school system’s success	4—good listeners	101—keeping students engaged	40—high percentage of the migrant and the non-English speakers
52—an example of poor leadership is funding	5—truly understands what your concerns are	102—teacher work days where we actually had time	41—trying to get people to think in the 21st century
54—always has a group of people who would represent different parts of the school system	6—what you do on a day to day basis	103—look at the data and see where we were as a system	81—inconsistency with superintendent
56—a lot of different opinions about how we were doing things in our school	7—trying to communicate	104—to be able to look at our standards and share ideas with each other	82—I felt bad for principals many times because they received the blame for decisions that were made above them
111—he definitely has the students’ best interests at heart	8—the pulse of what is going on	112—really have an opportunity to get into the data	83—our board of education is very involved in decision-making
117—I learned some things not to do	9—what I can do for you	115—just keeping up with the curriculum and instruction piece	108—he was fairly young when he became an administrator

After the second tier coding was complete, the researcher wrote memos on each of the four themes developed from the data. These memos were used to answer the research questions for the study, which included the life experiences of the principal, the barriers he faced in doing his job, and the strategies he used to increase student achievement at this school. The following text reflects the themes developed from the data to answer the research questions. This data will be presented from the view of the principal, Doug Rainey, and then from the perspective of the teachers interviewed in chapter 5. The sub-titles for each theme were reworded to reflect the voice of the principal from In Vivo coding. Also, themes represent separate, individual concepts. However, some ideas and practices from the data may cross multiple themes.

#### Themes—Principal Doug Rainey

##### *Leading the Vision*

This theme presents Mr. Rainey as a visionary leader who built a new era for the school by working with imagination, insight, and boldness. He brought together the school's stakeholders around a shared sense of purpose. He displayed an ability to interconnect the whole and serve the good of the whole, constantly seeking to address the systemic root causes of problems to create real breakthroughs.

When Mr. Rainey took over at Elway High School, it was not a failing school, but in the first year of CCRPI, the score was a 76.8. Mr. Rainey's vision for the school, however, was for something better. When asked about his vision for the school, the principal had a lot to share about where he saw the school going. He stated when he first became principal, one of his focuses was "maintaining discipline". He believed right from the start this was one of the main ways he could show his staff he would be

supportive of them. He expressed from the beginning he was focused on “putting out the small fires so they don’t become big.” An additional area he expressed focus on from the time he first became principal was increasing student achievement through improving classroom practice with teachers. He stated that students often had a tendency to zone out when it came to their classes. Attention on bell-to-bell student engagement and concentrated efforts for staff development in the area of student engagement were focal points of the vision he originated. He put plans in place to help with these things he saw as organizational weaknesses.

Fullan (2003), Gupton (2003), and Kouzes and Posner (2012) stated leaders are tasked with having and then sharing a vision they have for their organizations. Furthermore, the authors go into detail about how leaders should establish these visions. Leaders should help articulate a shared vision with others in their organizations to get buy-in and follow through from those in their employ (Fullan, 2003; Gupton, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Mr. Rainey perceived his leadership through a visionary prism. Horth and Buchner (2014) advocated for leaders to innovate in order to improve their organizations in the current complex world. They claimed leaders can be held directly accountable for a climate of creativity within their organizations and must act in innovative ways for positive change to occur in their organizations.

One of the biggest challenges in education has been how teachers and educational leaders alike continue to focus on what they have always done (Olson, 2009). Fullan, et al. (2006) expressed how one way to combat these difficulties is for the organization itself to embrace complexity by always looking for better ways and for adjustments that can be made, and doing so both individually and collaboratively in groups, from the top

to the bottom of the organization. Mr. Rainey faced his problems by searching for ways he could lead through innovation and have his organization's people also begin to work in innovative ways.

As a leader, Mr. Rainey created Elway's alternative center to help meet the needs of students. The alternative center incorporates online and hybrid classes to help students accelerate learning and catch up with their peers. Mr. Rainey credited this improved student success to this innovation. He emphasized, "We really focused on our graduation rate and came up with some ways to ensure kids were going to be on track." His rate increased "from 73 up to 90% and then up from 90 to 93 and then 96%." The 96% graduation rate has continued over the last two years for the school. The innovative part of the alternative center was the ability it gave students to double-up classes by using a block period to take more than one class at a time at the center, using an online class basis facilitated by a teacher. These types of personalized schedules take deep understandings of the students themselves and a great deal of time identifying and facilitating with individual students. They also take a willingness to think outside of the common educational continuum.

Horth and Buchner (2014) also advocated that the second component to innovative leadership is "leadership for innovation". By this term, they meant leaders must not be the only innovators in the organizations to experience real change. Mr. Rainey perceived this as vital to continued growth and student achievement at the school. He encouraged creative thinking and problem-solving skills among his teachers. For example, he tasked his teachers with re-writing the curriculum for all their academic courses. All teachers were involved and worked on the task both individually and in

groups, sharing ideas on how they could make it better and improve their courses' alignment with state standards. A visionary leader embraces change and views the use of new ideas and processes as progress. This leader strives to find better and faster ways to achieve success. In accordance with Hill, Brandeau, Truelove, and Lineback (2014), Mr. Rainey created an organizational climate in which employees were challenged to apply innovative thinking.

Mr. Rainey encouraged his staff to become innovative by including them in the search for ways to increase the school's CCRPI score. He stated, "I worked very hard to try and get the teachers to understand it (CCRPI) because what I remember with AYP, the key is the teachers." He empowered teacher leaders with special trainings to better understand the CCRPI score and what it meant. He deployed these teachers to train other teachers within their departments on ways to improve teaching and learning. He met with the entire staff in a school-wide training session and challenged them to find innovative ways to increase their scores. He encouraged them "to become the expert." With teachers working on ways to better prepare students and to innovate classroom and school practices to increase scores, they have improved the score to a 86.2 in 2017.

Mr. Rainey continuously harnessed the school's complex systems, thought at the system level, and guided practice and principles to enable teachers to adapt and reassess their thinking (Fullan, 2001; 2003; 2008a; 2008b). He raised the school's test scores by incorporating the whole system to tackle one problem. He encouraged his staff to come up with different innovative ideas and to improve student performance by delegating subject departments to brainstorm for possible strategies to raise the CCRPI. When people are challenged to innovate and create change, this may also increase the

complexity of the organization. Mr. Rainey appeared to be prepared for the unintended consequences of change as a result of teacher creativity and innovation as predicted by Fullan (2008a). The firm relationships he had with staff and the “family” atmosphere of the school may have assisted him in foreseeing such outcomes. On numerous occasions, the data revealed he received input on change initiatives from teachers and used balance in measuring how to implement change within the school based on feedback from others.

### *The Right Place at the Right Time*

This theme presents Mr. Rainey as an exceptional communicator and a leader who values positive relationships with the school’s stakeholders. He presented himself as a leader who is drawn to the relational side of his work. He demonstrated communication in the way he collaborated with teachers to set school goals. He communicated his messages with candor and developed strong relationships with all stakeholders. His leadership attracted people to come together towards realization of a common goal—improved student achievement.

In accordance with Bolman and Deal’s (1991) human resources organizational frame, Mr. Rainey’s leadership emphasized support, empowerment through distributed leadership mechanisms, staff development, and responsiveness to employee needs. He provided support through listening. Teachers stated he made himself available and wanted to get their input and hear concerns. He empowered others in his building as well by depending on lead teachers to disseminate information and to help support and train others. Teachers were provided both timely and effective professional development, and the principal made himself available to continue and discuss learning opportunities. Mr. Rainey also was quick to help teachers who needed resources. The researcher witnessed

two occasions when he immediately took care of teacher needs himself. His human resource orientation provided an image of the school as “family” with a focus on his relationship with stakeholders. He was able to separate the school from individual needs as he emphasized the human side of the school. He met individually with teachers to work on unit planning. This process challenged some teachers, but overall, the school benefited from such collaboration and work. The literature on leadership does speak to relationships, but when considered in context, leaders will not be successful unless they can establish working relationships, earn people’s trust, and communicate their own wishes both consistently and effectively (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). As the data were analyzed, it became very apparent the principal studied did a good job of both establishing strong relationships with others as well as consistently and effectively communicating what he needed from them. Mr. Rainey works on professional relationships through proximity. He noted checking in with his teachers daily was important, and the teachers interviewed all commented on how he often dropped into their classes to see how things were going.

Kouzes and Posner (2006) agreed relationships play a vital role in a leader’s success. They argued the importance of the relationship that leaders share with their constituents. They frankly stated:

No matter how much formal power and authority our positions give us, we’ll only leave a lasting legacy if others *want* to be in that relationship with us. Others decide whether to run away. Others decide whether to cheer or jeer. Others decide whether to remember us or forget us. No discussion of leadership is complete without considering the quality of the leader-constituent relationship. Leadership

requires a resonant connection with others over matters of the heart. (p. 48)

When asked what motivates him to do the hard, day-to-day work of being a principal, Mr. Rainey admitted he felt as if “there was a calling to the relational side.” He believed working with and relating to people was something he felt he was good at and helped him in his job. He further said, “I don’t walk around with the stress on my sleeves with the staff and students.”

Bates (2006) stated one of the biggest building blocks for forming and moving relationships and organizations forward is strong communication of vision. How well communication comes across can be the difference between productive organizations and less motivated, unproductive ones. Likewise, Beslin and Redding (2004) shared the idea, “. . . at the heart of building trust is the process of communications” (p. 2). When asked about how he relates to teachers, the principal stated he strived to maintain “a professional but yet relaxed relationship with teachers.” He went on to state, “They’ll be heard. They may not get what they want, but they will definitely be heard.” The belief he should be the one who gets teachers what they need to do their jobs was also a strong motivational factor for the principal. He said he makes a constant effort to check in with teachers during the day. He holds the belief that being visible will not only inform him of what is going on in the school but also will let teachers know he is there for them. He believed it went a long way in building up a sense of trust between him and the teachers. Beslin and Reddin (2004) concurred: “Building trust in an organization’s leadership requires a personal effort on the part of the leaders themselves” (p. 1). Mr. Rainey was willing to take the time and personal effort to ensure there was trust. He stated he made it a point to come back to teachers when he disciplined one of their students. He said he



wanted the teachers to know he desired to resolve the issue, and if it was not yet resolved, he needed to know where he could continue to intervene. Also, in describing his leadership style, he stated: “I know I can’t be friends with everybody; that’s not what I’m here for, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be friendly in my approach.” Mr. Rainey was observed approaching teachers who may not have completed some tasks that needed to be finished. When I observed him checking their progress, he was professional and cordial in these exchanges and received the information he needed without being accusatory or too direct.

Researchers continue to show how a positive school climate can have benefits for teachers and students (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012). Singh and Billingsley (1998) also reported teachers who feel supported by their administrations can have more of a commitment to their work and schools. Brown and Medway (2007) also contended schools where teachers openly communicate and feel supported by colleagues and their administrative staffs tend to have better academic outcomes than other schools. Likewise, schools that also establish strong student-educator relationships tend to have better student academic and behavioral outcomes (Brown & Medway, 2007). Mr. Rainey strongly believes in a school environment that allows teachers to teach. He stated: “If teachers will do what they need to do, and they’re good instructors and good teachers, and good with kids, then my job is to remove any obstacles and roadblocks that come up in their way.” To achieve this goal, he ensured teachers had the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively. In one instance, the principal and I were observing a teacher who mentioned he wished he had a clicker so he did not have to go back to his computer to change slides on his PowerPoint presentations. Shortly after, the principal went to the

technology room, checked out a clicker, and then went back to the teacher and gave it to him. He then waited for the teacher to hook it up and made sure it was working correctly. When I asked him about it later, he replied teachers often want things such as the clicker but rarely take the time to follow through with getting what they need. He said they are busy and have a lot on their minds. He felt if he can make their jobs easier, then it is what he was supposed to do. In another instance, when talking to a teacher about where he was with a curriculum project he was working on, the teacher expressed the concern he wanted to work on it at home, but his work laptop was down and had to be turned back in. His wife was often using his home computer with her work. The principal immediately arranged with the technology person to give the teacher a laptop to use temporarily. The principal demonstrated efficiency and expediency in handling teachers' needs. This behavior contributed to the creation of a relationship based on trust with the teachers.

The principal went out of his way to develop equally good relationships with students. Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2018) contended positive relationships with students may contribute to improved academic performance. Mr. Rainey increased student moral by celebrating students' successes such as being accepted into colleges. He made sure students received sufficient advisement and support to monitor their progress and made them feel as if help was always available. The principal believed in personalizing education at the school by encouraging teachers to nurture and provide students with life skills such as writing job resumes. He helped ensure students applying for dual enrollment classes were properly informed on the process. He invested time and properly monitored the school's counselor regularly to ensure graduation plans were in

place for each at-risk student at the school.

Simons (2002) posited leaders who achieve high levels of behavioral integrity possess a degree of transparency, candor, and honesty to facilitate open lines of communication to create positive environments that promote effective teaching and learning. Teacher participants in the study confirmed the principal's communication style as a possible reason for this successful tenure. Mr. Rainey concurred. "You can't emphasize [communication] enough. You also can completely confuse it and make it complicated." The principal believed in the importance of timing when communicating important events at the school. He communicated explicitly to avoid being misunderstood. He often reflected on the message to be transmitted before communicating with the entire staff. This helped him to anticipate possible responses from people receiving his messages. He explained if he could think through what would probably be asked, then he could find ways to communicate much more effectively up front. Groysberg and Slind (2012) concurred the best leaders engage their employees in conversational ways rather than with commands and initiate practices within their organizations to instill values around open conversations between leadership and employees.

Avolio (2016) concluded ultimately for leaders, it is important to be more transparent and candid in relational interactions than not. Mr. Rainey preferred face-to-face communication versus email communication. He had a way of catching up with teachers and having face-to-face interactions. He "often looked for proximity towards certain key individuals." Mr. Rainey at times delegated communication responsibilities to other building leaders to ensure access to as many teachers as possible. He stated that

after speaking with one of the lead teachers, “he is now tasked with that, and I trust that he will do it. That’s part of the other key, too. I don’t have to always be the one [to communicate]; I have to trust that it is going to get done though.”

Mr. Rainey’s staff and the parents I observed respected his honesty. He was observed behaving professionally and with integrity when discussing student progress with students and their parents. He stated: “I think that a lot of times it’s being real about where the end of their roadmap is and what the trajectory they currently are on is, but immediately following that with a way to change the trajectory.” He went on to explain he liked when the worst-case scenario was startling because it sometimes meant it was easier to get the student back on the right trajectory. He helped parents to be accountable for their children’s education. He put procedures in place such as In-School Suspension, extending longer hours so parents would need to pick their students up, or the parent needed to attend an extra meeting to work out academic or disciplinary issues. He emphasized, “But I am also going to let you know that I care and that I’m trying to figure out a way for that not to have to be the case, but everyone has to pull their little red wagon.”

Mr. Rainey made time to meet and greet students from the bus or from the parking lot every morning. He was observed casually speaking with students and teachers who were on bus duty. He gently prodded students to adhere to the school’s dress code. Teachers were accustomed to his being close in proximity to them and used to having casual conversations that he would often initiate. I realized he used many of these interactions, although seemingly casual, to acquire information he needed professionally. When he needs something done, or he wants to ensure something is being done, he has a

tendency to place himself strategically where he will “run into” someone. One may then hear somewhat casual conversations, but he also either then gets his message across or gets the information he needs. Beslin and Reddin (2004) also speak to the importance of leaders having both formal and informal methods of communicating with employees.

Mr. Rainey is available, approachable, and visible in the school. He made and scheduled time to walk throughout the school, engaging with staff, students, and parents in a genuine desire to interact and determine if they were receiving the care and attention they deserved. This allowed him to determine if the teachers’ needs were being met to enable them to do their work. Working side-by-side with teachers allowed him to tactfully and respectfully educate one person at a time, teaching them ways in which they could improve instruction. Rockwell (2015) argued this leadership style helps leaders to better connect with those they employ. This was the principal’s strength, as he seemed to sense where he was needed the most throughout the day. Mr. Rainey knew his school well enough to be where he needed to be when he needed to be there, all with purpose. Whether that purpose was preventing students from doing something they should not, or whether it was making sure he could run into a teacher from whom he needed to get information, he was in the right place.

### *Leaving No Child Behind*

School principals must play many roles during the school day, but the most effective school principals are not only managers and disciplinarians but also instructional leaders (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). In the following section, I focus on instructional leadership and the effort to help all students succeed, as noted by Mr. Rainey’s perspective. He provided a common vision of what

good instruction should be, supported teachers with the help and resources they needed to be effective in their classrooms, and monitored the performance of teachers and students. My interpretation of the data showed he worked toward increasing rigor at the school, personalized the educational setting for students, and worked both individually and collaboratively with teachers to improve their classroom practices. His main focus when he became principal was centered on improving instruction within the school.

Principals must be more than just managers (Fullan, 2008b). To have success in student achievement they must also be visionaries and excellent instructional leaders (Fullan, 2003). Daresh and Playko (1995) defined instructional leadership as consisting of “direct or indirect behaviors that significantly affect teacher instruction and, as a result, student learning” (p. 33). These behaviors may include setting clear goals, managing curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources, and evaluating teachers regularly to promote student learning and growth. Instructional leadership was a realm in which Mr. Rainey admitted he had room to improve. Being only in the classroom for five years before he became an administrator, he listed curriculum and instructional leadership as challenges and things he wanted to continue to master.

Mr. Rainey strongly emphasized the importance of academic rigor to help students find success. Blackburn (2017) defined rigor as an environment in which students are expected to learn at high levels and with support can demonstrate that learning. Mr. Rainey believed when he took the job, students had the tendency to check out and “just play school”. He stated: “They weren’t fully engaged; they weren’t truly understanding what they were experiencing in class.” He addressed this first. From what he articulated in interviews, this was a two-pronged attack. The first thing he began to

stress was encouraging teachers to engage students in their current curriculum. He encouraged teachers to engage students bell to bell and to question constantly. Socratic questioning techniques and seminars began to be the topics in professional learning.

Second, the principal focused on teachers' instructional proficiencies in the classroom. One method the principal used and shared during the interviews was what they termed curriculum talks. During these "talks," teachers came in and present their upcoming unit to the principal and perhaps colleagues who teach similar content. Moss and Brookhart (2012) contended one of the biggest gaps teachers face is their theoretical views of what works in their classrooms and what they actually practice. For instance, in conversation a teacher may contend students should be engaged in authentic learning, but a visit to the class may reveal students practicing tasks more in line with rote memorization of material. Mr. Rainey combated this in the following way. Before each unit, the teachers were asked to present what would be taught in a curriculum talk. They presented the units to the principal and sometimes also to colleagues who taught similar subjects. They needed to present in detail, each PowerPoint, worksheet, and formative and summative assessment that went along with the unit. The principal stated it was "very surprising that certain teachers would be very resistant to the whole curriculum planning meetings." He believed these meetings, however, were one of the best things he could have done to improve instruction and rigor at the school. Teachers were better prepared and had thought through and received feedback on details of their lessons and their assessments. These vetted activities were also then more apt to keep students engaged.

The principal and teachers prided themselves in the provision of personalized

instruction to meet student needs. Through direct observation at the research site, I saw evidence of this personalization, both in classroom practice with teachers, as well as in the alternative center at the school. Wolk (2011) encouraged educational leaders to allow students “to choose an educational pathway that they believe is compatible with their interests, aspirations, and learning styles” (p. 111). He goes on to state: “We ought to be offering a variety of educational opportunities and not ‘delivering’ the same education to every high school student” (p. 111). Elway High School’s principal is attempting to accomplish this task on multiple levels.

Struggling learners at the school are a focal point for the principal and his staff. The principal and his counseling staff kept a spreadsheet that included every student in the school. The counseling staff and the principal utilized this easily accessible data to determine if students were on track for graduation and what courses they needed to make up. Lewis, Madison-Harris, Muoneke, and Times (2010) contended data analysis can play a major role in filling gaps for students and ensuring success in school. With these efforts Mr. Rainey stated: “We really focused in on our graduation rate and came up with ways to ensure that kids were going to be on track on that four-year hit.”

Margolis and McCabe (2006) shared general strategies for strengthening struggling students’ self-efficacy. These methods include planning moderately challenging tasks, using peer models, teaching specific learning strategies, capitalizing on student choice and interest, and reinforcing effort and correct use of strategies. Mr. Rainey and his team used many of these methods in their strategizing to help struggling students reach graduation. The first and foremost way they got students who are behind back on track was working with students in the alternative center. The school uses a full-



time teacher solely tasked with running the center. The center incorporates a mixture of online and hybrid classes to service students and to help them accelerate their learning. Through the alternative center, in line with Margolis and McCabe (2006), there is student choice, moderately challenging tasks that can be divided up, the time for the alternative center teacher to focus on individual student needs, and the ability to reinforce students' efforts. Many of these students, the principal explained, are identified using student data even before they get to the high school. Students who had been retained in elementary and in middle school were the most at-risk for dropping out. He incorporated a combination of holding these students back in the eighth grade when they had not showed mastery yet but giving them some high school courses through the alternative center to gain confidence and experience. With the campuses being close together, these students could walk over for one high school period during the day and take one or two high school courses through the center, allowing them to acclimate to high school and gain some valuable credits. He would then explain to the students what the end of their road could look like. He stated he explained to students in these situations they could still graduate with their cohorts. The principal knew as these students matured, he could still help them catch up and have them graduate with their appropriate class. He believed showing them how graduating with their peers could happen with hard work was a strong motivational factor for students. The principal and his staff see the importance of working with students and forming these relationships. This has paid off for the school and the students, with the school boasting a 96% graduation rate in 2016.

On the other end of the spectrum, the principal and the school have promoted a viable dual enrollment program to increase academic rigor and ease the high school-to-

college transition for students. Dual enrollment classes can serve as a “warming up effect” for many, especially low-income students, and may help to increase the number of these students who finish higher education (Taylor, 2015). Dual enrollment classes are courses through local colleges that offer high school students college credits at no cost. There are three state-based programs in Georgia that can cover these costs for students: the Accel program, the HOPE grant program, and Move on When Ready (Education Commission of the States, 2018). The principal believed it was important to help students who were interested to sign up and navigate these courses. Mr. Rainey explained that his counseling staff and other faculty ensured students understood the process of dual enrollment, where in other places students did not receive such individual attention. He added:

Here, there is a lot of hand holding, a lot of calling up ourselves and helping them call the registrar and helping them learn how to navigate getting signed up for classes. That has made a huge difference to these kids, and I think it has helped to impact their lives.

Exposing these students to higher education has given them the drive and the knowledge needed so they can navigate higher learning.

Another way the principal and the school have found to personalize the experiences for students is a vast array of CTAE course offerings to provide students rigorous core elements, performance standards, and skills necessary after high school graduation to go straight into the workforce or choose college/university or the military for additional training (“Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education”, 2015).

Advocates for personalization and choice for all students support the CTAE initiatives

(Margolis & McCabe, 2006; Wolk, 2011). Current Georgia State School Superintendent Richard Woods agrees with this perspective as well. In an open letter attached to the 2014 CTAE annual report he stated: “This is essential work because our students are not widgets or manufactured parts. One size does not fit all. We must personalize education for all of Georgia’s students, and CTAE programs are helping us do just that” (Woods, 2014). From culinary arts, nursing, to 12 varieties of agricultural classes, students at Elway are given opportunities to explore and grow in their potential future career areas. The principal added, if nothing else, he believes sometimes the variety of CTAE offerings can at least help students decipher what they do not want to do. Students can have the opportunity to sample what nursing would be like and can sometimes eliminate a choice when they find out it is something they would not like to do. The principal stated he believed these understandings could be just as helpful and cost efficient to students in the long run by preventing them from finding out in college when they were paying for their education. The principal also found partnerships with local colleges to offer students more choices in CTAE electives, including law and justice as well as cosmetology classes.

#### *Remaining True to Your Values Through Barriers*

This theme presents the barriers Mr. Rainey faced as he led Elway to gains in student achievement and a top-five state CCRPI score for all Title I high schools. As principal, he has encountered the vast complexities of the job, high levels of stress, and at times limited control over key functions of the school. Also, even in the times he was limited in his control of those functions, he was held accountable for everything that had to do with students and their academic outcomes. I will outline strategies he used to

overcome these barriers and to continue growth in student achievement.

As major changes in education loom and cuts in many public school budgets continue, the job of running the nation's schools has become more complex, challenging, and stressful (Fullan, 2003). All principals will face barriers in their jobs (Fullan, 2003). Principals often are dealing with many competing interests at the same time (Krajewski, 2008). Even in the best of circumstances, many of these interests balance and pull a principal in different directions (Fullan, 2003). A principal must be able to anticipate barriers and problems before they come and then be able to safely navigate through them when they do arrive (Miller & Lee, 2014). A failure to do this can mean problems that compound and sometimes a short-lived tenure as a principal. Fullan (2003) further explained: "One of the great strengths one needs, especially in troubled times, is a strong sense of moral purpose" (p. 19). From vision to relationships to instructional practice, one thing that was evident and continued to sustain Mr. Rainey has been the strong willingness to fight for what he believed was right for the students of his school. This purpose is also what he seemed to rely on when he was faced with many of the barriers he has had to cross.

Principals at different schools can face vastly different barriers, which expands the importance of leaders' looking at systems as a whole and strategically thinking through complexities to increase student achievement (Hallinger & McCary, 1990). One of the ways the principal expressed he tried to avoid these situations was thinking through what a decision would look like one to four years down the road. He stated: "Something that I guess would be a skill or a strength of mine is being able to see the ramifications of doing things." Whether it has to do with curriculum and what classes should be offered

to certain students or funding and how to explain his new four-by-four block schedule to the board of education, the principal always made the effort to think through those decisions beforehand. Anticipating questions would often give him an advantage, as he always had answers for his constituents when they analyzed his decisions.

According to the principal, he has had his share of struggles. He explained how he noticed superintendents who were not from the area often had difficulties acclimating to the culture of the community, and many faced major issues as a result. Mr. Rainey was also an outsider and had to face this barrier himself. There had been six different superintendents over the last 10 years in the school district, and one teacher directly mentioned she believed this was a challenge for the principal. She further stated: “I felt bad for principals many times because they received the blame for decisions that were made above them, and they had to take it because that is where they were in the line of hierarchy.”

Some of the superintendents retired, and some had been non-renewed, yet the principal was able to increase student achievement through these changes in district leadership. For example, Elway’s CCRPI score rose from the 70s to an 86.2, and the graduation rate rose 20% over this time. Mr. Rainey overcame the barrier of starting as an outsider in the community and faced the challenges of adapting to new superintendents and their visions. He stated he learned early on how one had to be personable with people and had to listen, which Spears (2004) stated as one of the major components of being a quality servant leader. Mr. Rainey stated the superintendents who did not do this successfully did not last long, and he learned to have an open ear to the community. Stacey’s (1992) research indicated these circumstances may have been employed to the

principal's advantage by using bounded instability to begin positive change initiatives. Stacey (1992) elaborated that excellent leaders often seek bounded instability in positive ways to drive innovation. Throughout these times of instability with the superintendents, Mr. Rainey was able to push through changes in the bell schedule, a four-by-four block schedule, and other adaptations he deemed as positively influencing his school.

When first asked how he defined barriers, the principal stated: "Getting people to do what you've asked them to do." At times he saw certain parents as barriers as well: Getting some parents to hold their students accountable can be challenging. When asked how he dealt with the everyday barriers, he stated: "You have to remain true to your values and what you are going to do."

The principal's challenges included dealing with the school board and school politics. He explained his current board is very supportive, but that had not always been the case. He stated a significant challenge was facing a faculty when it was obvious an unpopular decision came from his superiors. More frustrating was the fact that it would be unprofessional to express how he really felt about these decisions to his staff. Some of these decisions involved hiring decisions. Board members might have had a person they wanted in a position, or they had someone in mind to hire, and they put up road blocks when a principal wanted to hire a different person.

The principal also explained how he dealt with some of these barriers. He said, "I think when you deal with a barrier, the one thing that has remained positive is the ability to just regroup and rethink the problem and attack it a different way." Fullan (2001; 2003; 2008a; 2008b) also stressed the best ways for leaders to harness complex systems was to think at the system level and then to react on such understanding with guided practice and

principles that help organizations continuously adapt and reassess their thinking.

Mr. Rainey utilized Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frames of leadership to manage some of these organizational challenges. These included structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames. He used human resources to develop positive relationships with stakeholders and to create a quality school environment for teaching and learning. He used the political frame to build coalitions with different interest groups, such as his superiors, the board of education, and community members. Within this frame, the leader is required to "build coalitions, loyalty, and negotiation skills" (Howard, Logue, Quimby, & Schoeneberg, 2009, p. 25). Many of the barriers Mr. Rainey described had to do with making changes under political circumstances; he related how he dealt with negotiating these changes with those above him. Some examples of this included hiring decisions, organizational changes at his school, and allocations.

The principal's toughest challenge came the first night he was officially named to the position. He accepted the job and was at the board meeting where he was to be approved as principal. He was confirmed, and the board then went into an executive session. The principal was under the assumption that at this point he would assume the duties of the job and be allotted the same administrative staff already in place. This meant he would be hiring an assistant principal to fill the job he vacated by taking the principal's job. However, without any discussion with the new principal, the board saw this differently. Following the executive session, Mr. Rainey was informed the board would not be replacing the job he was leaving. In the principal's words, "So I was left with an assistant principal who was a very weak link at the time." The principal was faced with another predicament: Although in charge of the K-12 school, the system had

just built a new facility for K-8. This was on the same campus but separated by a long walk from the high school. The principal had one assistant who had a weak reputation and only elementary experience. In order to manage the new facility and to establish himself as the principal, he believed he needed to be stationed at the new facility. The principal stated: “You would have had nobody over here at this high school. So I went home pretty discouraged on something that should have been a very exciting thing, being the principal.” Blank (2016) claimed the best leaders will see disappointments as opportunities. Mr. Rainey did just that. As he previously stated, principals have to learn to regroup and thought, “How can I make this a positive outcome? I think just rethinking the entire problem and coming up with a solution that would work for everyone.”

Fullan (2001; 2003; 2008a; 2008b) recommended facing adversity by seeing the system as a whole and reassessing the thought process in complex circumstances. In this instance, Mr. Rainey’s solution was a Spanish teacher who taught both Spanish and ESOL. The teacher, who had an administrative degree, was made a dean at the high school. Mr. Rainey first convinced the teacher, then his superiors. He stated it was not perfect, but it was a solution. It took time, but he gained the assistant principal position back. The principal stated: “That was a major deal. I think just making it turn positive was going home and rethinking how can I still get what I need out of this.”

Mr. Rainey struggled with the unpredictable nature of the job. He often found himself having to think on his feet and make changes along the way. Spears (2004) encouraged good servant leaders to use foresight to improve situational outcomes. Stagnancy and being reactive can never move a school (Pascale, et al., 2000). Mr. Rainey elaborated on this by saying:



I think while those were tough times, and they were disappointing times because it wasn't really what I thought being a principal would be, I ended up being able to make it then, and still become who I am as a leader. I learned a lot about working with a board that can be very political or micro-managing. Luckily today, it is not like that, but that was a way to not just sit there and wear it on my sleeve but to accept it and go forward with it and make it the best that you can.

All principals will face barriers, and every circumstance will be different (Fullan, 2008b). Doug Rainey's point is that one must face these barriers, think through the complexities that go along with school leadership, make decisions, and move on. When things do not work out, one must rethink, regroup, and try analyzing the situation from a different angle. If a leader has established good relationships along the way, that will be helpful in tough times. This attitude may have contributed to Mr. Rainey's resilience and ability to survive difficult situations and still be successful. Teacher participants reiterated his primary devotion was to student success. He also took the time daily to establish positive relationships with faculty by getting to know them both professionally and personally (Scott, 2017). He then showed consistency in practice and work ethic and earned people's trust (Beslin & Redding, 2004). As teachers trusted him, he began to challenge them, and with consistent challenge came continuous school improvement. As Fullan (2008b) stated, he has created a true "learning organization" that can continue to improve, adapt, and grow.

### Summary

This chapter presented the lived experiences of Doug Rainey, a Title I high school principal. The analysis of data brought four major themes, including Leading the Vision,

The Right Place at the Right Time (Communication and Relationships), Leaving No Child Behind, and Remaining True to Your Values through Barriers. These themes addressed the research questions and contributed to the body of school leadership literature. Chapter 5 will explore the findings as interpreted through interviews with teachers who have worked with Mr. Rainey.

## V.

### RESULTS CONTINUED

Three teachers who previously worked with Mr. Rainey were interviewed one time each, and data were collected to corroborate with the principal's narrative and school documents. A technique was used to select teacher participants. The following criteria were used: a) people who had worked closely with the principal, and b) people who no longer worked under the direct supervision of the principal. The interviews with teachers helped to ensure reliability in the study, as they assisted in triangulating data obtained from Mr. Rainey and non-participant observations of the principal.

The purpose of this study was to analyze a high-performing, Georgia Title I high school principal who participated in Georgia's school improvement efforts and made significant gains in student achievement. The researcher determined the lived experiences of the principal, barriers he faced, and strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving student achievement. Data were collected through six interviews, three with the principal of the selected high school and one interview each with teachers who had formally worked with the principal. Further data were collected through observation field notes, school documents including agenda items for meetings and copies of school data, and other documents the principal presented to stakeholders. Purposeful sampling was used for the selection of the research site and principal. The findings addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high

school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified high-performing, Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

The researcher used State of Georgia CCRPI results to distinguish the top five CCRPI scores for Title I schools. Elway High School was included in this top five category of scores. The researcher then contacted the principal to gain background knowledge and acquired the needed approvals to conduct research at the site. The principal was accommodating, open to having the researcher on site, and involved while conducting research. Interviews conducted were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and field notes were taken over the course of the study. All participants and research site names have been changed or omitted and replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. For teacher pseudonyms, the researcher will refer to them as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3.

The three teachers selected each played a vital role in the data collection process. Their input on Mr. Rainey's vision for the school, communication with school stakeholders, relationships, views on his instructional leadership, and his struggles played a vital role in gaining a deeper perspective on his leadership.

## Participant Profiles

### *Teacher 1*

Teacher 1 is an ESOL teacher who works with kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at Elway's K-8 school. She taught third grade under Mr. Rainey's leadership at Elway. Teacher 1 has been in the classroom for more than 20 years. She believed school leadership influenced student achievement at her school. Teacher 1 commented that Mr. Rainey "always encouraged teachers to take it to the next level so that you are keeping students engaged and so that they are wanting to learn." The teacher deeply respected Mr. Rainey's devotion to the school and his students. She believed his decision-making was for the well-being of students. She expressed that he is "here for the kids." She appreciated the principal's ability to empower teachers by including them in decision-making processes. She stated: "He always felt like he needed to meet with us lead teachers and see how the other teachers felt about different things." Mr. Rainey's collaborative leadership style made her feel valuable and a part of the team.

Open and friendly lines of communication between the principal and teachers is vital in any school system for the benefit of all stakeholders (Luthra & Dayiha, 2015). In this study, Teacher 1 felt empowered by the principal's open and respectful communication style. She shared, "He would explain why it had to be this way, and a lot of times that is really all teachers want to know." She sometimes served as a conduit for communication between the staff and the principal. She stated: "So it was easy to come talk to me, and then I could go talk to him and didn't have to give any names. I could just tell him the situation."

Teacher 1 was motivated by Mr. Rainey's leadership that brought additional skills, knowledge, and expertise to her instruction. She suggested the principal's instructional leadership efforts created a valuable principal-teacher partnership that motivated her to work diligently to continue to improve her instructional practice in the classroom. Mr. Rainey's support made her feel less isolated in the classroom as she joined the ranks of decision makers and used her influence to help shape instructional leadership and strengthen key areas of responsibility within the school. She stated:

He always wanted curriculum to be rigorous. He realized to get there he had to motivate the teachers too. He always realized that in order for students to succeed, he needed to make sure his teachers were happy. He valued our opinion. He cared what we thought.

She suggested the principal made her "feel like a professional."

In addition to classroom support, Teacher 1 appreciated Mr. Rainey's efforts to get to know his teaching staff better and his encouragement to work hard. She reflected, "It was just little things with him, like stopping in to check on you, not micro-managing, but just saying, 'Hey, I'm just seeing how everything is going.'" Teacher 1 appreciated the principal's active role in creating the necessary conditions for positive relations based on trust. She elaborated, "What meant the most to teachers was that he trusted them, and he knew that you were going to go into the classroom and that you were going to do your job."

#### *Teacher 2*

Teacher 2 is a media specialist who serves the district school system. She formerly taught language arts and drama under the supervision of Mr. Rainey. Teacher 2

has been in education for more than 10 years. Teacher 2 also was a graduate of Elway High School and grew up in the community. She believed Mr. Rainey's leadership played a role in student achievement growth at the school. She stated that Mr. Rainey "values academic success" and believed he gave "ample support . . . getting the resources that we would need." She respected how Mr. Rainey worked tirelessly to improve the culture of the school and encouraged relationships with all stakeholders. She also noted how he was a collaborative leader who listened to his staff and included them in decision-making processes in the school. She elaborated in this statement:

Doug, on the other hand, I feel like always has a group of people that would represent different parts of the school system, representatives of teachers definitely because they are the ones that are having to carry out most of the ideas that the principals come up with.

Teacher 2 believed a major focus for Mr. Rainey was the culture of the school, and he incorporated strategies to both assess and monitor school climate. She stated he initiated "programs where we could make connections with students." She believed his work and leadership focus shifted at some point from just implementing instructional improvement strategies with teachers to directly working on how teachers mentored and interacted with students. She stated: "I could tell that his focus shifted from just looking at data, which is very important. But also we started implementing different programs to where we could make connections with students." She explained her belief that Mr. Rainey made strong efforts to make the school environment like a family, a place where teachers and students could feel comfortable and collaborate. She believed the kindness and caring his leadership style encompassed forged trust within the school. Teachers in

turn felt empowered as they participated in the school's decision-making processes. She explained Mr. Rainey was "very trustworthy and kind and compassionate."

Teacher 2 acknowledged Mr. Rainey's effort to get to know the students through his outstanding communication and leadership styles. She explained, "He interacts with the students any opportunity he can. He is always present in the lunchroom, outside, at bell changes, and he comes into the classroom." She observed his powerful presence throughout the school, stating, "He would come in for observations and wouldn't just sit in the corner. He would sit down with the students and see what they were doing." She explained if the students were in groups, he would often join them. She stated his efforts to get to know students paid dividends. Students were comfortable with him, and she believed he empowered students to engage in dialogue, which in turn helped the principal understand their perspectives and how they as students needed to be served at the school.

### *Teacher 3*

Teacher 3 has been in education for more than 20 years. She is currently a fifth-grade classroom teacher at the Elway K-8 school and was under Mr. Rainey when he was the principal there. Teacher 3 provided compelling evidence of his leadership attributes that may have contributed to his school's success. She stated: "You can't minimize the importance of the administrator in a system."

Teacher 3 believed Mr. Rainey's open and decisive communication style was vital to the success of the principal and the school. She agreed he was an exceptional communicator and leader. "One thing that always sticks in my mind about him," she stated, "he is just one of the most awesome at communication I've ever been around." She believed his communication style often helped implement school change initiatives.



She stated: “Our demands are forever increasing, and we’ve got to just step it up. He’s good at communicating that there are things we are doing well, but a lot of things we could do better.” She admired his ability to convince his followers to support his vision and mission. She stated: “He was really good at communicating with you and getting you to buy-in on what he was trying to accomplish.” She expanded how Mr. Rainey was a good communicator by sharing, “When the principal is positive, and they’re out there asking what I can do for you and what can I help you with, the morale is just better in the whole building.”

Teacher 3 verified Mr. Rainey’s success in creating a positive learning environment characterized with mutual respect and trust. She attributed his success to his transparent open-door leadership style that made teachers feel valued. She stated: “When you have somebody that you really respect, you want to do a good job when you are working for them.” She explained, “There is a collegial type of trust and respect that goes on here.” She confirmed Teacher 1’s notion of Mr. Rainey as one who knows what is going on in the building and teachers’ first-hand daily struggles in their classrooms.

Teacher 3 felt comfortable with Mr. Rainey’s acceptance of teachers’ individual differences and his giving them the freedom to unleash their creativity in classroom instructional practices. She stated: “He didn’t necessarily try and fit everyone into a mold.” She trusted his expertise in pedagogy to help her manage instructional differentiation between grades, which she believed should occur for peak student mastery. She explained, “We just had a lot of special challenges that other grades didn’t.” If he realized something was going to benefit teachers and help students, then he gave the autonomy needed for the teachers to do the important job of driving their own instruction.

Teacher 3 confirmed “he trusted me to do what I needed to do.”

### Teacher Input on Themes

Transcripts from interviews, memos from field notes taken during observations, and school documents were combined and systematically analyzed using a case study analysis method derived from Houghton et al. (2015). This method combined strategies from Miles and Huberman (1994) and principles outlined by Morse (1994). The first step included a thorough reading and In Vivo coding of all documents, which can be viewed in Table 1. A second layer of pattern coding was then completed on the In Vivo coding to develop themes from the data, which can be viewed in Table 2. The following themes were established from teacher input in interviews. The sub-titles for each thematic section were set to reflect the teachers’ voices from In Vivo coding. Although the themes outlined stand alone, some ideas and concepts from the data may serve as examples under multiple themes.

### *Envisioning Student Success*

The first theme portrays Mr. Rainey as a visionary leader who provides opportunities that help an organization gain capacity and meet the needs of its constituents (Taylor, Cornelius, & Colvin, 2014). Teachers highlighted the following aspects of his visionary leadership: the ability to ignite their teaching passions, connect and inspire them to realize their greatness, allow them to navigate stressful situations with flexible minds, encourage them to dream big, inspire them to harness their unique gifts and strengths to innovate and find creative pedagogical solutions, and create an open environment where stakeholders learned to trust each other.

Teachers perceived one of the main focal points of Mr. Rainey’s vision for the

school was improving classroom instruction. Teacher 1 spoke of student success and rigorous curriculum when asked about the principal's vision for the organization. Teacher 1 explained, "He always wanted the curriculum to be rigorous." She continued that he wanted teachers to "help the students be even more than they imagined they could be." Teacher 3 stated: "He just wants it to be a better school; he wants to push teachers and students to do their best" Teacher 3 expanded on this by speaking about the CCRPI score for the school and how the principal intervened and challenged teachers to make improvements to increase the score. She stated that Mr. Rainey makes "sure that teachers understand what it is that you are supposed to be teaching" and is willing to "explain to us how this works and what it is the state is requiring for us." The teachers felt Mr. Rainey empowered teachers to be a part of a team who worked toward the same goal.

The teacher participants agreed a strong part of the principal's vision coincided with a trait of servant leadership outlined by Spears (2004). They commended his commitment to the growth of people and noted the school culture he established allowed people to work on improvement. The teachers saw the principal as investing in people through communication, both individually and in groups, which they believed positively influenced organizational growth. Teacher 3 articulated the fact Mr. Rainey was good at communicating the things the staff were doing well and how they could do better. She agreed the culture of the school under his leadership created a place where teachers believed they had the support of their administration. She stated he was great at "communicating with you and getting you to buy-in on what he was trying to accomplish."

Kotter and Whitehead (2010) extensively discussed buy-in and elaborated how

one of the best ways to gain it is by being straightforward. They discussed the advantages of being candid about ideas and ones' intentions behind the ideas, giving others on the team opportunity to disagree and offer other alternatives. Teachers discussed how Mr. Rainey was straightforward and often candid. They expressed how he gave people opportunities to share feedback and give opinions on organizational direction. Teacher 1 stated: "He valued our opinions. He cared what we thought."

Horth and Buchner (2014) claimed leaders can be held directly accountable for a climate of creativity within their organizations and must act in innovative ways for positive change to occur in their organizations. Teachers expressed one way Mr. Rainey attempted to innovate at the school was his push for instructional technology because he believed the incorporation of technology fit into his vision for the school. The teachers perceived him as being very proficient with instructional technology and explained that he both encouraged and modeled appropriate uses. They saw the use of instructional technology as part of his overall vision for improving student achievement by assisting teachers in engaging students more in the process of learning. Teacher 1 stated: "He will always require that rigorous curriculum and always tried to have new things for our students like classes that incorporated technology. I think he has been a really good instigator at getting a lot of technology in our classrooms and ensuring that teachers have what they need and will be able to use it." Garrison and Kanuka (2004) stressed technology will be one of the most transformative innovations in education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The teachers highlighted how Mr. Rainey continuously pushed teachers to try different methods of instruction. Teacher 3 stated: "He is very big on technology and very willing to help teachers." She continued to explain how he often offered help, noting how

he would say, “Come and see me, and I can teach you how to do this.” Teacher 1 explained a strength of the principal was how he encouraged teachers to use technology. She stated: “I think he has just always encouraged teachers to take it to the next level, so that you are keeping students engaged and so they are wanting to learn.”

The teachers also expressed how building trust was facilitated through the continuous work the principal invested in his people. Beslin and Reddin (2004) explained how leaders must work to earn organizational trust in times of change. They agreed communication is the fundamental building block of organizational trust. Teacher 3 expressed, “There is just a collegial type of trust and respect that goes on.” This trust motivates teachers to be more willing to challenge themselves. Teachers felt Mr. Rainey’s trust allowed them the space to make mistakes while building a cycle of continuous school improvement. Teachers felt empowered and did not fear the experimentation needed for true instructional breakthroughs to occur. Because of his encouragement, teachers saw trying new and innovative practices as learning opportunities, not as failure when instructional experimentation did not go as planned. Teacher 3 explained Mr. Rainey was more of a “why not kind of person.” She explained she has had principals who, every time she asked for something, would question why. She explained how Mr. Rainey asked, “Why not?” She inferred he was willing to allow teachers the space to try new things.

Teachers provided testimony of Mr. Rainey’s continuous support of a positive culture in the school by providing time and programming for teachers to build relationships with students. Teacher 2 shared a great deal about the principal’s dedication to the growth of people and the culture of the school by stating, “In the past five years or

so, I could tell his focus definitely shifted from just looking at data, which is very important, but also to implementing different programs where we could make connections with students.” Her view centered around the upbeat school climate and the positive relationships among staff and students throughout the building. An example of one such program is WIN groups that were set up at the school. This Teachers as Advisors program allowed time for teachers to meet with, get to know, and counsel groups of students. It was her view the principal’s vision centered on helping students and teachers to make these connections where true, deep learning could occur. Sizer (2004) confirmed how teachers are the greatest influence for students, good or bad. He encouraged school leaders to create an environment where teachers can also flourish, continuously strive for improvement, and be the influence needed for students.

Teacher 1 suggested the principal’s vision encompassed his dedication to trusting his staff and assisting them with continuing their personal growth in order to grow the school as a whole. She also shared similar beliefs with Teacher 2 about relationships and school climate. She stated: “I think he always realized that in order for the students to succeed he needed to, make sure his teachers were happy.” She pointed to the fact that he recruited good teachers who would stay there because of the school climate. She stated: “If teacher morale is low, he knew that, first of all, you were going to lose a lot of teachers. They are going to go to other schools because our system is out in the middle of nowhere.” She also provide details about the culture she believed the principal attempted to set up at the school. She stated the principal earned the teachers’ trust by treating them as professionals and showing genuine concern and care for them. She said, “It was little things with him, like just stopping in to check on you.” She believed teachers knew and

felt the principal trusted them to do their jobs, and they truly believed he supported them. She claimed this cultural vision the principal had for the school made it a place where teachers could focus on student learning and feel free to innovate and work to become better teachers.

### *The Element of Trust*

This theme focused on the teachers' perspectives on the principal's communication style and how he both formed and maintained positive relationships with teachers, students, and parents. Williams (2015) contended good communication matters in schools because educating students is not a solo act. Participants in the study suggested Mr. Rainey's outstanding communication style helped them work more effectively in teams. Information flowed freely from the top to the bottom of the organization. Teachers felt empowered to act and Doug was always available to hear concerns. Doug even set up teams to better deploy information and ideas, which improved teacher morale, as all team members believed their concerns were heard. Teacher 1 elaborated, "He met with us lead teachers and see how teachers felt about different things." Teacher 2 believed he "was very understanding." Teacher 3 stated: "He is about respecting people's ideas." Teachers believed his clear communication style, his candor while communicating, and the strong relationships he established set the standard for an educational environment where strong professional practice could occur. The teachers contended Mr. Rainey's communication style and the strong relationships he built with all stakeholders promoted trust within the organization, freeing staff to explore more innovative practices in instruction.

All teachers concurred on the importance of good communication skills as a

critical element for school leaders. Luthra and Dayiha (2015) confirmed of all qualities a good leader should possess, precise communication is vital. They stated: “Great leaders are always considered as first-class communicators; they have a clear set of values and they always believe in promoting and inculcating those values in others” (p. 43). Teacher 3 expressed Mr. Rainey was an exceptional communicator. She stated a strength Doug has is “communicating and respecting people’s ideas.” Luthra and Dayiha (2015) also agreed listening is an important key to communicating. They posited, “The best communicators always have a unique quality of listening peacefully to what others are speaking” (p. 44). The authors explained how listening allows good communicators to observe the situation and to read people; analyze attitudes, behavior, and anxieties; and give leaders an opportunity to restate their purpose to fit a situation. Teacher 3 explained teachers wanted to feel their concerns were being heard, and Mr. Rainey made himself available for teachers and listened to their input. She stated he was “easy to talk to, and that is a good thing to have.” Teacher 2 also stated Mr. Rainey was willing to listen to input before he made important decisions. She explained he formed committees at the school to get input. She chaired one of these committees and stated, “I found out that our ideas were not always other people’s ideas, and I think all of our different groups found out there were a lot of different opinions.” Her belief was Mr. Rainey gained buy-in by having these lines of communication established. The teachers also believed his communication skills and his ability to form relationships helped with students and parents as well. Teacher 1 explained how when it came to the students, it was the “little things he has done along the way to encourage the good relationship with them.” Teacher 2 stated how Doug is “always wanting to talk to students.” Gupton (2003) also supported



the idea principals must build and maintain positive relationships with parents and the greater community to be successful.

Scott (2017) confirmed the influence of effective school leadership on positive relationships with teachers. She advocated for the leader's ability to care personally about the employees while challenging them directly. She explained how many leaders fall short when they care personally but refuse to challenge their employees because they do not want to hurt someone's feelings or feel they may walk the line of being unprofessional. On the other hand, she stated how leaders who constantly challenge but do not take the time to form trusting relationships and show caring will not find success. Lencioni (2002) and Welch and Byrne (2001) also agreed candor and honesty are vital for a team. Teachers commented on how well they believed Mr. Rainey walked the line between being direct and caring. Teacher 3 explained how he "can get on to you, but you feel good about it." She stated how sometimes he would leave her room for response after a conversation, and she would think to herself, "Did he just correct me?" She described a situation where she attended a parent-teacher conference with Mr. Rainey and an unsuccessful summer school student and his parent. She explained, "I remember how he talked to that parent, just no fluff, very honest and to the point." She remembered "coming out of that just having a totally different view of him and having a lot more respect for how he handled the situation." She stated how with students he is always encouraging but quick to let them know when they are not meeting expectations.

Leaders can be more direct and precise with communication when they have established relationships, and constituents understand how they care (Scott, 2017). Trust must be present in the organization for leaders to be successfully direct. Lencioni (2002)

listed the absence of trust as the first dysfunction on any team. All teachers concurred Mr. Rainey worked to provide care and to get to know those in his organization. They believed his leadership practices were important to building trust and a cohesive atmosphere at the school. Teacher 3 stated with Doug, “There is a collegial type of trust that goes on.” Teacher 1 stated what “meant the most to teachers was that he trusted us.”

The traits teachers described regarding Mr. Rainey and his ability to form positive relationships within the building can be explained by Spear’s (2004) characteristics for servant leadership. His ability to listen and show empathy for others helped to form trust with his staff. Teacher 2 described a specific time in her career when she believed the trust present in her relationship with the principal both kept her in the profession and helped her explore ways to find growth in herself and her career. She described a personal situation where she was going through a tough time. She stated: “The principal was the first one I went to.” She further stated how Mr. Rainey “is great when it comes to communication. I feel I could go to his office at any time. If he is not there, I feel like I could e-mail him, and he would respond and say, ‘Sure, I’m back, I’m ready to talk, what do you need?’” She explained how her situation had to do with a restlessness she was feeling in her job. She stated: “I guess I was on the verge of burnout in my eighth year of teaching.” She expressed how she trusted the principal enough to be honest with him and believed he would be helpful and not judgmental about her situation. She stated how she saw him as:

Without sounding corny, in a sense a friend, being able to go and talk to somebody as a friend in the profession without being scared of me going to him and saying I don’t like my job anymore, and they’re like, well, sorry, you can stay

or leave. But that is definitely not the kind of person he is.

This situation expands on yet another characteristic of servant leadership as described by Spears (2004) that Mr. Rainey encompassed. Spears (2004) described the characteristic of healing. He explained, “Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts . . . servant-leaders recognize that they also have an opportunity to ‘help make whole’ those with whom they come in contact” (p. 9). Mr. Rainey took the time with his staff to care, and in return the teachers expressed how they believed in and respected him for this type of leadership. Teachers felt he created an environment that encouraged hard work through the establishment of relationships, which benefitted all involved, particularly the students of Elway High School.

#### *Supporting Teachers for Student Success*

This theme focused on the teachers’ perceptions of Mr. Rainey as an instructional leader at Elway High School. Teachers discussed his determined efforts to increase rigor at the school by focusing on classroom instructional practice, his encouragement of the use of student data to guide instruction, his desire for teachers to know students personally and use personalization in the classroom, and his strong focus on professional development in the realm of instruction. Regardless of his seeing instructional leadership as a challenge, the teachers realized rigor and instructional practice were important to the principal. Teacher 1 stated: “He always wanted curriculum to be rigorous.”

Blackburn (2017) described classroom rigor as vital for increased student achievement. Mr. Rainey spoke about his vision for the classroom as a place where students are engaged in material and teachers excellently facilitate the learning. Teachers acknowledged and appreciated his knowledge of pedagogy. Teacher 3 stated that he

“truly understands what your concerns are and what you are doing on a day to day basis.” Teacher 1 explained how he wanted and challenged the teachers to “help the students be even more than they imagined they could be.” Teacher 1 highlighted his ability to help teachers increase classroom rigor. She stated he provided them with the time they needed to collaborate. She expressed the benefits which came with just being “able to look at our standards and share ideas with each other.” Raywid (1993) confirmed one of the main differences in schools that show success and the schools that do not is the extent of time teachers are given to plan collaboratively, discuss and inform instructional practice, and even critique one another. Teacher 1 stated how at times, Mr. Rainey was willing to provide substitutes or arrange class coverage to give teachers more time to focus on the curriculum and student data.

Teachers affirmed Mr. Rainey’s ability to use both school and student data to drive and plan instruction. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) contended using student assessment data to drive instruction is a major key to successful teaching and learning, and this area is one of the first the principal began to explore with the faculty. Before the school began to improve their CCRPI score, early in the principal’s tenure, several teachers felt a major factor in the turn-around came from the principal’s belief that teachers should understand and use student data on multiple levels. Teachers were divided up into groups and tasked with understanding how the CCRPI score is comprised. They were then directed to analyze how their school had done and to contemplate and discuss ways improvement could be made. This session was completed during pre-planning before a school year started, and then the ideas that stemmed from the discussions were implemented during the school year by the teachers.

The teachers interviewed elaborated how the use of this school-wide data in many ways spilled over into the classroom. Teachers began using student data more effectively, and discussions continued about how data could be used in real time to further assist with student gains in achievement. Teacher 2 expressed how Mr. Rainey's use of committees, or focus groups, within the school contributed to teachers' successful use of classroom data through their data committees. She stated how one of Mr. Rainey's focuses for the school was "looking at data," whether at the school or the classroom level.

Teacher 2 also discussed how Mr. Rainey's focus shifted from data usage to teachers' forming relationships with students. Her belief was the WIN program he implemented to assist with this was not just a school culture initiative, but also imparted positive student achievement outcomes. Though it is often difficult to see relationships and instructional practice going hand in hand, the teachers made this direct connection. Jones and Tittle (2004) stated the importance of students' having at least one adult in the building they can go to with confidence and discuss anything from a problem they are having in their math class to what they should wear to a job interview. They elaborated on the effectiveness and reasons behind how good Teachers as Advisors Programs can influence schools positively, both culturally and academically.

The program Mr. Rainey implemented at EHS was called WIN groups. This Teachers as Advisors Program was established to ensure students had a caring adult in the building. The teaching faculty and other school staff were given a group of students to mentor during WIN time, which occurred for an hour once each week. In WIN time, teachers had the students in a class and had opportunities to meet with them individually to discuss their classes, their grades, and any other barriers the students may be facing.

The teachers believed these relationships with students helped academic achievement at the school and many times prevented students from getting behind academically, as mentor teachers would often intervene before academic problems mushroomed. Teacher 2 stated how with these groups, “It’s almost like you are a family.” She continued:

I know for sure that it has made a good impact on graduation rate . . . those kids that we felt were falling off the map all of a sudden had someone asking about them. How was your day? That way we were able to reach out to every student, not just those who were involved in extra-curricular activities.

Guskey (2000) believed no major change in education is possible without professional development. Sizer (2004) also stressed how teachers, more than any other factors, are the key to moving schools in positive directions for student achievement. The teachers perceived that Mr. Rainey saw proper training as a vital key in improving instructional practice at the school, which would lead to better performance scores for students. When Mr. Rainey first began to assess how his school could improve the CCRPI score, one of the first things he did was send a group of teachers to get training on what comprised the CCRPI score. These teachers were then used to continue in-school training with other teachers. Teacher 1 stated:

One thing that he implemented when he was our principal was teacher work days where we actually had the time. . . we could sit down with co-workers and really dig into the curriculum and look at the data and see where we were as a system, see our strengths, and really go from there.

She went on to state how the time was well spent, and they could “develop units that are going to help the students.” Dufour and Matos (2013) stated when teachers are

given time to collaborate and share unit planning, they will improve their craft. They determined how time provided for collaboration and learning gives teachers the ability to self-reflect and to see first-hand how teachers who are having more success with student achievement are structuring their classrooms. As Fullan et al. (2006) stated, the professional development needed in schools today is much more than just a single training session. They believed true professional learning should occur with teachers in groups who learn from each other on a daily basis. Mr. Rainey attempted to give his teachers the time and space required for this type of collaborative learning to organically occur in the school.

Teacher 2 also stated she believed many of the innovations and new ideas were accepted at the school because Mr. Rainey put forth efforts to include the entire staff in ideas and initiatives. Teacher 1 agreed: “He just valued our opinion . . . he cared what we thought.” Spears (2004) recognized servant leadership traits that fit teachers’ perceptions regarding Mr. Rainey. They included a focus on the growth of people, persuasion in getting people on his side, an awareness of the current climate of the organization, and a desire to build community by keeping everyone focused on similar student achievement goals.

#### *Overcoming Old Mindsets*

This theme focused on the barriers teachers perceived Mr. Rainey faced in his job as principal of Elway High School. Teachers acknowledged how two of the barriers included political obstacles and limited control of school functions at certain times in his tenure. The teachers believed Mr. Rainey’s not being from the community was a barrier in he had to overcome as well.

Vidich and Bensman (2000) contended small rural communities tend to cling to traditional values and are often closed off to change. Teachers perceived Mr. Rainey as someone who had not grown up in the area, and being originally from New York, he had to work at becoming a part of the South Georgia community. One teacher elaborated, “We have a lot of, I don’t know, almost the good ol’ boy kind of mindset here. And some of that goes back to I don’t even know how many years. So I think that some of [his] challenges included overcoming some of those old mindsets.”

Participants perceived how certain qualities Mr. Rainey possessed were some of the biggest benefits to the community’s accepting him as the principal of the school. They believed he had to earn the community’s trust as he implemented school change efforts. The qualities they outlined fit into the characteristics for servant leadership as outlined by Spears (2004). The teachers discussed the fact Mr. Rainey spent a great deal of time listening. Teacher 2 stated how he had “an open-door policy for everyone” and how he kept “open lines of communication.” He also encouraged growth in others. Teacher 2 shared how he was “always there to offer support.” Participants also expressed how he attempted to build on community, both in and out of the school. Teacher 3 elaborated on how these traits helped him become accepted by the school and the community. She stated: “He is about communicating and respecting people’s ideas and their opinions. I know he was constantly having to run interference between what the teachers wanted and what the parents wanted, but he had a way of earning people’s trust.”

Mr Rainey utilized Bolman and Deal’s (2003) political frame of leadership to manage some of these organizational challenges. The participant teachers observed him build coalitions among the school’s various interest groups. Teacher 2 admired his use of



a political approach to facilitate change during the realities of the revolving door of superintendents that existed within the district. She shared, “Number one, probably the biggest barrier was our inconsistency with superintendent. I know it would have to be hard to be a principal to not have a consistent superintendent. We went through three superintendents over the last couple of years.” The teacher believed often, when new superintendents came in, they wanted to make changes or had a new agenda. Mr. Rainey continued to build coalitions with the varying superintendents and took the time needed as outlined by Hock (1999) to form relationships with his superiors. Teacher 3 expressed how one superintendent was met with a great deal of opposition but explained how Mr. Rainey attempted to help: “[He] was doing a lot to try and promote that superintendent to get people to get on board.”

Principals often traverse challenging relationships with members of the school board. Teacher participants identified instances when Mr. Rainey faced such challenges. Participants reported instances when their board of education seemed to obstruct Mr. Rainey from achieving his vision and mission for the school’s initiatives. Specifically, the board tended to dominate the decision-making processes, limiting his control over school functions, including his ability to hire staff. They realized the principal was doing the bidding of a superintendent or the board of education at times. Teacher 3 expressed how this made it difficult for the principal because these new ideas often had to filter through him to the staff. She said she “felt bad for principals many times because they received the blame for decisions that were made above them, and they had to take it. That is where they were in the line of hierarchy.” The teachers agreed, however, that Mr. Rainey was still able to flourish in these conditions because he had the ability to form relationships

with all constituents. They perceived some of the same characteristics of servant leadership he possessed, as with the entire community, benefited him with his superiors, whether it was the superintendent or the board (Spears, 2004). These included listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

Mr. Rainey's staff believed he wanted what was best for students, and this belief often spilled over to those above him in the hierarchy as well. The consensus from the teachers was he did a great job of communicating and forming relationships with teachers, as well as with his superiors. The way in which he expressed his vision and direction for the school and explained his decisions was a major benefit in continuing to move the school in positive ways under multiple superintendents and boards of education.

### Summary

A snowball technique determined three teachers who had previously worked with the principal and added to the data collected for the principal in the study. The teachers were interviewed to establish their views on leadership and the leadership style of the Title I principal in the study. The themes established from these interviews included Envisioning Student Success, The Element of Trust, Supporting Teachers for Student Success, and Overcoming Old Mind-Sets. The data garnered from these interviews contributed to the literature on school leadership. The final chapter will include a closing discussion and conclusions from the data collected.

## VI.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this case study was to analyze a high-performing, Georgia Title I high school principal who has participated in Georgia's school improvement efforts and has made significant gains in student achievement. It also determined the lived experiences of the principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving student achievement. Data were collected through six interviews, three with the principal of the selected high school and one interview each with teachers who had formally worked with him. Additional data were collected through field notes taken by the researcher when observing the principal at his work. School documents were also collected to corroborate other sources of data. The research site and principal were purposefully selected for this study. The teachers who had formally worked with the principal were selected by using the snowball technique and some were suggested by the principal. The findings addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?

RQ2: What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified high-performing, Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

A combination of strategies by Miles and Huberman (1994) and principles outlined by Morse (1994) were utilized to analyze the data. The researcher initially transcribed all interview data and wrote narrative memos that expanded on all field notes taken. The data were then read through and coded using a first round In Vivo method. Once first round In Vivo codes were established, the researcher used pattern coding to establish second round codes, which began to establish themes within the data. Memos were written based on each of the four themes that were established from pattern coding to add clarity and to compile the data.

#### Research Questions—Final Findings

*RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I principal prior to and while implementing student achievement efforts?*

Mr. Rainey and I began our conversation about his life by going back to his childhood in New York City. When it came to his experience in high school, he looked back with a sense of regret over wasted opportunities. Mr. Rainey stated: “New York City has some very good public high schools, but I didn’t really take super advantage of that.” He further stated that at the time, “Education was not something that I valued.” These experiences helped shape him into the man and principal he is today. He wants students in his school to relish the high school experience. He wants the students to feel a connection to their school. He stated: “I think the key is the relational aspect with the kids.”

Mr. Rainey's initial career trajectory meandered into various professional enterprises before he settled into the field of education. His first adult job was restaurant management in the fine dining industry in New York. When he grew tired of this lifestyle, he then tried his hand at ministry, but to no avail. He soon realized ministry was not for him but working with young people was. From his experiences in ministry, he learned he could relate to young people and felt a strong calling to lead. He wanted to continue to work with students and discovered a passion for helping kids that eventually led him to a K-12 education career. He went back to school for education, taught for five years, and then began his work in school administration where he has remained.

Mr. Rainey's experiences in management and ministry prepared him for the school administration job. All of the jobs he had held to this point have strong ties to working with and relating to others and leading people. He elaborated, "After five years in high school, I became an assistant principal. The principal and I developed a really good relationship; he poured into me a little bit." He further stated the principal was transparent with him about what was entailed in being a principal. The principal shared the highs and lows of the job with Mr. Rainey and helped prepare him for what was to come. He continued, "By 2010, they moved him [the principal] up to be superintendent in the middle of the year, and they moved me up to be principal for the rest of the year." After his stint as the interim principal, he was officially given the job as principal the next school year.

Mr. Rainey explained the relational side of the job is what attracted him to the work. He spoke about how a previous superintendent helped him learn how important the relational side of the job was. He stated: "I learned relational things and how to handle

this community.” He saw himself as a servant leader and his job as a way to serve the teachers, the students, and their parents. Connections can be made from his leadership style and the characteristics Spears (2004) outlined for servant leadership. Mr. Rainey shared many of Spears’ (2004) characteristics, including listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, a commitment to the growth of people, and building community. He was optimistic for his school and envisioned the school continually improving to better accommodate students and their varying needs. He added how many of opportunities provided at Elway “have allowed them [students] to get exposed to things in high school that they probably wouldn’t have at another school.”

Another realm Mr. Rainey believed he was strong in was the area of budgeting and finance for his school. He stated: “I learned a lot about the funding side. I felt I knew a lot about the way QBE and FTE worked, and over the years, I have gotten a good understanding about how to not leave money on the table.” He stated how these understandings often helped him when he wanted to make changes at the school because one of the first areas people would question would be the cost. He could use his knowledge to persuade others, a characteristic Spears (2004) identified as a characteristic of servant leadership. He explained, “If you don’t understand the funding, then you can’t defend what it is that you want to do.” He went on to give an example of how this helped him move to a block schedule when he believed it would benefit students. He stated: “Block scheduling can be more expensive, but our system and our school number were designed where we were in that sweet spot in teacher scheduling where we needed two teachers per course on paper.” He continued, “But we really only needed 1.5 teachers per course. So it didn’t matter whether you went block or seven period day. I would require

the same staff.” He explained how he continued to explain this to his superiors and his community, and with this understanding, he was able to move the school to the scheduling he believed best benefitted his students.

When asked how he would explain his job to people Mr. Rainey said it was “probably like a circus master.” We both laughed, but he believed most school administrators would often feel this way. He also explained he attempted “to maintain a professional but yet relaxed relationship with teachers.” It was apparent through observations he trusted his teachers and ensured they had the resources they needed to do their jobs. I saw this trust first-hand when the county curriculum director was unsure if his teachers were going to come through with preparing for individual curriculum meetings. Mr. Rainey insisted they would be fine and followed up with some teachers to prove he was right. The teachers had followed through with what they needed to do. The teachers explained there was a mutual trust between the staff and the principal. Teacher 2 explained, “So I think that he puts that as a priority, being trustworthy and having that open door for everybody.” Teachers spoke to Mr. Rainey’s clear and constant communication style and to the fact he made himself very accessible to teachers and students. He cared for his staff.

He explained what he would do differently in his job if he could do the first few years over. His answer reflected back to his strong bonds with his staff. He stated: “The first couple of people you have to let go. Those are things that you have to relive.”

Mr. Rainey also agreed his relationships with his superiors have always been important and played a vital role in his success (Hock, 1999). He stated he always wanted to maintain a relationship with the superintendent where he was getting mentored. He

wanted to maintain a relationship where “I’m getting to know how the system works in all facets, including finance or state rules, state board rules, and policies and procedures. So I’ve tried to maintain a positive relationship there.” He felt it was important to have knowledge of how the system worked from multiple levels and believed these understandings often helped him to do his job better. He also believed it important to “keep his or her phone from ringing.” He believed the superintendent not getting phone calls and visits from parents, teachers, or others who had concerns from his school was a sign he was doing his job more effectively. He believed his superiors respected the fact he did not make their jobs more difficult. Through these efforts, Mr. Rainey has had a leadership experience where he led a school that has shown growth in academic achievement. The school’s graduation rate has increased more than 20 percentage points, and the CCRPI score has increased 18 points during his tenure as principal. The 2017 CCRPI score of 86.2 ranks his school in the top five Title I schools in Georgia in academic achievement.

*RQ2: What barriers did the high-performing, Title I principal face in his job while implementing student achievement improvement efforts?*

Sarason (1982) contended principals may be seeing more barriers in their work than should be warranted. He noted studies in which principals saw they were given too many limitations by their districts, when in reality, other principals in the district were doing atypical school procedures. He encouraged principals to think through barriers to their plans, to have a distinct knowledge of the system they worked in, and to be bold in their moves for change, not letting perceived barriers be the reason for stagnancy. Mr. Rainey has faced his share of barriers. My research supports that he found ways to



overcome the barriers he faced within the confines of his system. Through a distinct thought process and the ability to anticipate problems, as well as sometimes pulling back and rethinking problems, he has managed to successfully overcome obstacles and to lead his school to a superior state ranking in CCRPI score. The major barriers he faced included relating and dealing with all stakeholders, the complexities involved with increasing student achievement at a Title I school, being an outsider leading change in a small community, dealing with a very involved board of education, and facing numerous changes above him in the superintendent position.

Fullan (2003) asserted, “One of the great strengths one needs, especially in troubled times, is a strong sense of moral purpose” (p. 19). When I first asked Mr. Rainey how he dealt with the barriers he faced in his job, he responded, “You have to remain true to your values and what you are going to do.” One of the first things he mentioned was, “getting people to do what you’ve asked them to do.” He also discussed parents who were unwilling to hold their students accountable for grades and behavior. He stated that clear communication and staying the course were the best tactics to deal with these types of barriers. Others spoke to the principal’s communication skills as well. The teachers interviewed credited his communication style for many of the positive things that have happened at the school. Teacher 3 explained how she believed Mr. Rainey dealt with barriers: “I think it just comes back to [his] willingness to work with people and invest in people and to try and come up with a common ground.”

Bolman and Deal (2003) outlined frames leaders can follow. Many of Mr. Rainey’s challenges fall under Bolman and Deal’s (2003) organizational frame, which requires the leader to negotiate and build strong relationships with all stakeholders. One

such barrier Mr. Rainey discussed included issues that occurred immediately after he was first named principal of the K-12 school. This barrier was a system-induced obstacle that had to be faced. He initially shared the news how, as the new principal, the board would not be replacing his job as assistant principal. This setback left the principal to run a K-12 school not in the same building and with one assistant principal. According to Mr. Rainey, this ruined what should have been a celebratory night with his officially becoming a principal to a night filled with worry and frustration. He said this forced him, however, to become the principal. He stated he had to take his circumstances, re-think the situation, and make the best scenario he could. He found ways to deal with this situation, which required some creative thinking such as making a teacher with a leadership degree the dean of students at the high school.

Mr. Rainey and other participants also saw the board of education's level of involvement at the school as a barrier at times. He faced the situation of making recommendations for positions with people he believed were the best for the job, and then having those people overlooked by the board for people they preferred. This was very frustrating for the principal. He felt slighted by the board. He explained how he felt at the time, "If you want me to be the principal, let me be the principal, and don't make me accountable for the performance if I can't pick the performer." But again, when faced with frustrations, the principal stated he would "just recalibrate my plan." He reiterated that it is the leader's job to find a way with the resources provided to make the situation the best possible for the students. He stated how these experiences contributed to making him a better leader:

I think, while those were tough times, and they were disappointing times because it wasn't really what I thought that being a principal was going to be, I ended up being able to make it then and become still who I am as a leader, and I learned a lot about working with a board that can be very political.

As Fullan (2003) warned: "The principal of the future must lead a complex learning organization by helping to establish new cultures in schools that have deep capacities to engage in continuous problem solving and improvement" (p. 28). When given complex and frustrating situations, Mr. Rainey did just that. He problem solved and rethought situations to get the best out of them and continued down the path of improving the school. Any perceived setback can be an opportunity in organizational leadership if it can be thought about in the right perspective (Singh, 2016).

Along this line, connections can be made in the data as to how Mr. Rainey's servant leadership style could be seen as an advantage when working for change in a complex environment. As described by Spears (2004), servant leaders listen and are empathetic, which may garner trust with those who work for and with them. Teacher 3 stated Doug had "an open door and an open ear to my concerns and he trusted me." Servant leaders are also focused on the growth of the people in their organizations and hold fast to building the community of both the internal organization and those outside the organization. The trust these leaders gain can then assist when they need to use foresight and their powers of persuasion to win people over for growth and movement in the direction they see fit.

Mr. Rainey had established himself as a trusted and respected servant leader in his organization. When faced with complexities, mainly complexities of a political nature,

Mr. Rainey would not have to win people over because of the trust already established. He could even use the instability created from leadership changes to his advantage. According to Stacey (1992), good leaders often seek times of instability to inform innovation and move organizations forward. Mr. Rainey, given the many changes in superintendents, was offered a degree of instability. His school showed growth in student achievement through these times, a situation that could have been perceived by most as a barrier, but he took it as an opportunity. Structural and innovative changes within the school occurred throughout the many changes in district leadership. Mr. Rainey, who had established himself as a servant leader and gained trust, had both the foresight to understand what improvements needed to be made, as well as the power of persuading both teachers and the new leadership on how structural changes would move the school forward. He moved to a four-by-four block schedule, giving his students more opportunities per year to gain credits and in turn helping to increase graduation rates. He also introduced a new bell schedule that started the school day earlier and gave students more opportunities in the afternoons to find jobs and participate in extra-curricular activities. Further, he established the alternative center during this time to help push students toward graduation and increase the graduation rate by 20 percentage points, all of which helped to increase student achievement at the school.

*RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified, high-performing Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving student achievement at a high school in the state of Georgia?*

Mr. Rainey both directly, and in some ways indirectly, strategized for student success at Elway High School. His collective vision of where the school was headed has

changed under his tenure, but from the beginning, rigorous instruction, student engagement, and strong relationships between students and teachers have been a focus in his efforts to increase student achievement at a Title I high school.

Mr. Rainey's leadership has had some lasting impacts on Elway High School. There were strong connections to what was seen at the school and the work of Fullan, et al. (2006). The authors described when school organizations are in positive change modes, there will be a focus on what they termed as the "triple P core components" that are personalization, precision, and professional learning. Through a study of the principal, it appeared there were strong efforts to personalize the education of the school's students. There were opportunities for students to make decisions about how and when they received their education and opportunities for students to determine the pace at which they wanted to work to finish school. For instance, students who wanted to accelerate their learning were given multiple opportunities to take dual enrollment classes. The students were given the opportunity to accomplish this online as well as within the traditional school environment. Also, students who were not successful and lacked credits were given the opportunity to accelerate their learning by taking hybrid and online classes that may have allowed them to graduate on time with their peers. Mr. Rainey notes that "doubling up for just one block would help [students] see the writing on the wall . . . I can get out!" There was also precision in what he determined were focal points for his faculty to work on. He stressed the ongoing use of data and provided multiple opportunities for teachers to receive professional learning to support them in their efforts to work on specific instructional and relational strategies to support student growth.

McKinney et al. (2015) argued principals who are the most successful at changing school culture are the ones who share the belief that the ultimate goal should be to improve student learning. The teacher participants strongly articulated how improving student learning and outcomes was the primary vision of the principal. Teacher 1 stated: “He always wanted the curriculum to be rigorous . . . and to help the students be more than they imagined they could be.” Under his leadership, the school has become a place where the pursuit of student growth is nurtured and worked on by all. One of the primary ways Mr. Rainey approached this was by ensuring students had adults in the building who were forming mentoring relationships with them. Jones and Tittle (2004) advocated for the Teachers as Advisors Programs, believing they can positively influence both the culture of schools as well as student achievement. The WIN time set up by Mr. Rainey at Elway allowed teachers the time to talk to, get to know, and form relationships with students. Mr. Rainey understood what Deal (1990) meant when he stated the problem with schools is often much more spiritual than technical. Teacher 2 also stated students must first be able to trust someone before they can learn from them. Mr. Rainey had worked at establishing a school where this would take place. Students were comfortable, and teachers felt supported. He knew to increase student achievement, there had to be a culture within the school where there was trust at all levels, and students would be able to communicate their needs to teachers.

Another focus Mr. Rainey initiated was the use of school data to move the school forward. Arnold et al. (2006) stated an effective principal will both use and encourage teachers to understand data to make changes. Mr. Rainey believed if he were to make progress on state scores, teachers needed to first understand the process of CCRPI. He

tasked teachers in groups with analyzing state testing data and coming up with plans for how they could make improvements in these areas. He stated: “So, I selected at the high school level . . . several teachers, one from every department, and said you’ve got to become the expert.” Teachers stated they believed this use of data also initiated more data use on a daily basis by other teachers as well. They believed this helped teachers make more decisions in real time with formative assessments that help increase student achievement. Teacher 1 explained, “That’s when you are really going to be able to meet the goals that you need to . . . [and] help students succeed.”

Hock (1999) suggested that leaders should spend specific time on this task working with their superiors to build organizational trust and collaboration. In line with this, Mr. Rainey strove to take the time needed to form relationships with superintendents in the district. He has worked for four different superintendents in his time as principal, and even more in his time in a leadership role. To have survived, much less thrived as his organization has, he has had to work at forming these relationships, communicating and at times defending his vision and choices in decision-making. He also learned to support the superintendents with other staff and the community. Teacher 3 described one such time and stated: “He was doing a lot to try and promote that superintendent to get people on board . . . saying . . . this person really does have some good ideas.” His clear and concise communication style helped support the forming and maturing of these relationships with both his superiors and others.

Mr. Rainey’s strong communication style and the clarity it brings to what teachers should focus on is also another strategy used to increase student achievement in a complex environment. He believed when it comes to communication, “You can’t

emphasize it enough. You also can completely confuse it and make it complicated.” Teachers noted how his communication style and his knowledge of what was going on in their classrooms on a daily basis both positively contributed to teacher morale and the culture of the school as a whole. Teacher 3 expressed that he “. . . truly understands your concerns and what you are doing on a day-to-day basis.” Bates (2006) stated communication and the clarity with which leaders communicate are vital for moving organizations in positive directions. Mr. Rainey used communication as a tool to provide clarity to his teaching staff and to keep teachers on the same page in the complex environment of teaching and learning with diverse students.

Mr. Rainey has also made many efforts to work continually on the culture of the school. One of the first things he mentioned he believed strongly in when he first became principal was hiring the right people and putting them in the right spots. Hiring was directly related to one of his first barriers when the board of education undermined some of his initial personnel choices. According to Cranston (2012), principals play a vital role in creating their schools’ cultures, and one of the most remarkable ways they can do this is through hiring decisions. It was evident through his early tensions with the board over teacher hires that Mr. Rainey thought long and hard about hiring decisions, and he strategically looked for people who shared his vision. He stated: “I’ve always had this idea of recruiting the best and putting them in the right seat.”

#### Final Thematic Conclusions

The following text reflects the themes developed from the data to answer the research questions. In this section, the themes will be looked at from the principal’s perspective and the perspective of teacher participants, and at times their views will be



compared and contrasted. Themes represent separate, individual concepts. However, some ideas and practices from the data may cross multiple themes.

### *Vision*

Mr. Rainey presented himself as a visionary leader who used innovative practice to move his school forward. He showed the ability to interconnect the whole of the school, to address many of the systematic problems, and to create breakthroughs through innovative practice. Teachers saw his vision of the school as a place where students were strongly engaged in the curriculum, and teachers used innovative practices to facilitate student learning. Teachers also perceived how a strong part of his overall goals for the school had to do with culture, the relationships between stakeholders, and holding all personnel accountable for the well-being of students.

Mr. Rainey perceived his leadership through a visionary prism. Horth and Buchner (2014) advocated for leaders to innovate in order to positively move their organizations in today's complex world. They claimed leaders can be held directly attributable for a climate of creativity within their organizations and must act in innovative ways for positive change to occur. One direct way Mr. Rainey began innovative practice at his school was by addressing the needs of struggling learners and creating the alternative center for students. He believed this strategy to be one of the most impactful he implemented at the school. He stated how impactful it was to “. . . catch kids up through the alternative center” to “help them graduate on time.” The center's focus was helping students get caught up with credits in innovative ways, including online and hybrid classes. These innovative practices directly influenced student achievement, helping Elway's graduation rate improve from 73% to 96% in 2016. Doug understood the

problem with the graduation rate and had vision and initiative to solve a complex problem in an innovative way.

Horth and Buchner (2014) also proposed that the second component to innovative leadership is “leadership for innovation”. By this term, they mean leaders must not be the only innovators in the organization to experience real change. Mr. Rainey perceived this innovation as vital to the continued growth in student achievement. He encouraged creative thinking and problem-solving skills among his teachers. For example, he tasked his teachers with re-writing the curriculum for all of their academic courses. All teachers were involved and working on the task both individually and in groups, sharing ideas on how they could make it better and improve their courses alignment with state standards. Teacher 1 stated: “We could come to school . . . have a workday where we could sit down with co-workers and really dig into the curriculum and look at the data.” Hill, et al. (2014) advocated for leaders to challenge their employees to think innovatively. In accordance with this philosophy, Mr. Rainey created an organizational climate to challenge employees to apply innovative thinking. He approached the complex work of student achievement by challenging but trusting his teachers to be or to become the experts at how to make gains in their given areas.

Mr. Rainey continuously harnessed the school’s complex systems, thought at the system level, and guided practice and principles to enable teachers to adapt and reassess their thinking (Fullan, 2001; 2003; 2008a; 2008b). He raised the school’s test scores by incorporating the whole system to approach the problem of student achievement gains. He encouraged his staff to come up with different, innovative ideas and to improve student performance by delegating subject departments to brainstorm for possible

strategies to raise the CCRPI. When people are challenged to innovate and create change, it may also increase the complexity of the organization. Mr. Rainey dealt with this increased complexity by ensuring organizational communication was clear and by trusting others. He received input on change initiatives from teachers and used balance in measuring how to implement change within the school based on feedback from others. Teacher 3 believed he “respected people’s ideas and their opinions.” “Team learning” is one of the means Senge (2006) described for leaders who think at the system level. Senge (2006) also stated to deal with complexity, leaders must no longer be the all-knowing expert who makes all decisions; rather, they should empower others to lead in decision-making. Mr. Rainey used this system’s thinking strategy to solve complex problems in his organization.

When speaking on innovation, many of the teachers mentioned the fact that Mr. Rainey was proficient with instructional technology and how he both encouraged and modeled appropriate uses. They saw the use of instructional technology as part of his overall vision for improving student achievement at the school. Teacher 3 stated how one of the principal’s student achievement strategies was “definitely trying to incorporate technology.” Garrison and Kanuka (2004) confirmed Mr. Rainey’s emphasis how technology will be one of the most transformative innovations in education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The teachers all saw the principal’s clear vision as one of the traits of servant leadership as outlined by Spears (2004). It was also evident in his commitment to the growth of people, and the relationship and school culture that go along with this type of school environment. Teacher 3 articulated the fact Mr. Rainey was good at

communicating the things the staff were doing well and how they could do better. She agreed the culture of the school under Mr. Rainey was an environment where teachers believed they had the support of their administration. She stated how he was great at “communicating with you and getting you to buy-in on what he was trying to accomplish.” Kotter and Whitehead (2010) extensively discussed buy-in and elaborated how one of the best ways to gain it is by being straightforward. They discussed the advantages of being candid about ideas and clearly explaining intentions behind the ideas, giving others on the team an opportunity to respond and critique. Teachers appreciated Mr. Rainey’s straightforward and often candid demeanor. They expressed how he gave people opportunities to present feedback and opinions on organizational direction. Teacher 3 confirmed Doug was “no fluff. . . very honest and to the point.” Hock (1999) described candor within a team as vital to making key improvements in an organization.

#### *Relationships/Communication*

Teacher participants saw Mr. Rainey as a strong communicator who understood value in the relationships established at the school. He explained how he was drawn to the relational side of the work. He achieved gains in student achievement by using clear communication of goals, directness, and caring for others and their development. These focuses led to trust being built within the school. Teachers focused on his communication style and how he related to and encouraged others to collaborate within the school. Teachers believed trust was gained from his clear communication and his ability to listen and encourage input from others.

All teacher participants agreed communication is one of the most important elements a school leader should master. Luthra and Dayiha (2015) agreed that, of all qualities a good leader should possess, precise communication is vital. Teacher 3 agreed good principals are going to be good communicators and good listeners. The teachers admired Mr. Rainey's excellent communication style. Teacher 2 stated: "This principal, I will have to say, is great when it comes to communication." Luthra and Dayiha (2015) also agreed listening is an important key to communicating: "The best communicators always have a unique quality of listening peacefully to what others are speaking" (pg. 44). Teachers believed Mr. Rainey's open-door policy and his ability to listen to their concerns supported a positive school culture. Teacher 2 stated Doug is "very understanding" and that she was "able to go talk to [him] as a friend." She continued that he was "always there to offer support."

Lencioni (2002) and Welch and Byrne (2001) also agreed candor and honesty are vital for a team. Teachers commented on how well they believed Mr. Rainey found balance between being direct but caring. Teacher 3 explained how he "can get on to you, but you feel good about it." She then described a situation where she attended a parent teacher conference with Mr. Rainey with an unsuccessful summer school student and his parent. She explained, "I remember that he talked to that parent, just . . . very honest and to the point." She remembered, "Coming out of that [meeting] just having a totally different view of him and having a lot more respect for how he handled the situation." She explained that with students, he is always encouraging but quick to let them know when they are not meeting expectations.

In line with Bolman and Deal's (1991) human resources frame, Mr. Rainey's leadership style emphasized relationships. He portrayed himself as one who supports, encourages, and challenges those in the school. This perspective recognized people as resources to be developed, and often he perceived himself as coach, seeking to help teachers maximize their potential as they contributed to the team. Leaders may not be successful unless they can establish working relationships, earn people's trust, and communicate their own wishes both consistently and effectively (Kouzes & Posner, 2006).

Kouzes and Posner (2006) agreed relationships play a vital role in a leader's success. They argued the importance of the relationship leaders share with their constituents. They stated: "No discussion of leadership is complete without considering the quality of the leader-constituent relationship. Leadership requires a resonant connection with others over matters of the heart" (p. 48).

When asked about how he relates to teachers, the principal stated he strived to maintain "a professional yet relaxed relationship with teachers." He continued, "They'll be heard. They may not get what they want, but they will definitely be heard." The belief he should be the one who gets teachers what they need to do their jobs was also a strong motivational factor for the principal. He said he makes a constant effort to check in with teachers during the day. He believed it went a long way in building up a sense of trust between him and the teachers. Beslin and Reddin (2004) concurred "building trust in an organization's leadership requires a personal effort on the part of the leaders themselves" (p. 1). Mr. Rainey took the time and made the personal effort to ensure there was a trusting relationship between him and the teachers. He stated he also made it a point to

come back to teachers after disciplining their students. He said he wanted the teachers to know he desired the issue resolved, and if it was not yet resolved, he needed to know where he could continue to intervene. Also, in describing how he leads, he stated: “I know I can’t be friends with everybody; that’s not what I’m here for, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t be friendly in my approach.”

### *Rigor/Instructional Practice*

Mr. Rainey was an instructional leader in the school who worked with teachers in order to increase rigor and improve instructional practice. He also worked to personalize school experiences for students. Teachers perceived Doug as the instructional leader of the school. They commended his strong efforts to assist teachers in improving classroom practice, as well as his efforts to encourage and support innovative practice among teachers.

Daresh and Playko (1995) posited how good instructional leaders will display behaviors which may include setting clear goals, managing curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources, and evaluating teachers regularly to promote student learning and growth. Instructional leadership was a realm Mr. Rainey admitted he had to work at. Being in the classroom for only five years before he became an administrator, he listed curriculum and instructional leadership as challenges and areas he wanted to continue exploring and expanding.

Mr. Rainey spent a great deal of time dealing with instruction. One of his first goals was increasing classroom rigor at the school. Blackburn (2017) defined rigor as an environment where students are expected to learn at high levels, and with support, can demonstrate their learning. Mr. Rainey believed when he took the job, students had the

tendency to check out and “just play school”. He stated: “They weren’t fully engaged; they weren’t truly understanding what they were experiencing in class.” He addressed these perceived issues directly with teachers and focused professional learning in this realm.

Another instructional aspect Mr. Rainey addressed with teachers was lesson preparation. He described setting up curriculum “talks” with teachers where the teacher presented each unit before they taught it. Moss and Brookhart (2012) contended one of the biggest gaps teachers face is their theoretical view of what works in their classrooms and what they actually practice. Mr. Rainey ensured teachers were using strong methods of instructional practice through these discussions. He reflected that he often found himself making statements such as “Is this the best way to challenge students?” within these meetings.

Mr. Rainey also discussed the many ways the school attempted to personalize the educational experience for students. By using student data and reaching out to struggling students, he and his staff identified and found innovative ways to assist struggling learners. Margolis and McCabe (2006) shared general strategies for strengthening student’s self-efficacy. These methods included planning moderately challenging tasks, using peer models, teaching specific learning strategies, capitalizing on student choice and interest, and reinforcing effort and correct use of strategies. Mr. Rainey and his team have used many of these methods in their strategizing to help struggling students reach graduation, a great example being the alternative center which was especially designed for this reason.



Mr. Rainey and this team also used personalization to challenge all students within the school. Whether by providing opportunities for dual enrollment classes or offering a variety of CTAE classes and to encouraging student agency in classes, he and his team worked hard to provide student choice. Margolis and McCabe (2006) advocated for more student choice for struggling learners, and Wolk (2011) advocated for more personalization and choice for all students.

Raywid (1993) confirmed one of the main differences in schools that show success and schools that do not is the extent of time teachers are given to plan collaboratively, discuss and inform instructional practice, and critique one another. Teachers confirmed Mr. Rainey encouraged and provided teachers time to collaborate both with him and with one another regarding course content and planning. Teachers saw this as a major benefit and as one of the reasons they have improved student achievement at the school. Teachers stated that professional learning opportunities were also a major benefit to teacher growth at the school. Teacher 2 described how Mr. Rainey sent some teacher leaders to a training and had them come back and teach the faculty what they had learned. She stated, “They came back and presented . . . what some other schools were doing, and it was neat. We had an activity to try and help the teachers buy-in.” Guskey (2000) believed no major change in education is possible without professional development. Sizer (2004) also stressed teachers, more than any other factor, are the key to moving schools in positive directions for student achievement. Teachers stated the belief they were properly supported in their efforts to grow and to become better instructors at the school.

Teachers also strongly expressed one of Mr. Rainey's predominate pushes at the school was for increased classroom rigor. Teacher's held the belief that he both advocated and provided training to help teachers better challenge students. Blackburn (2017) posited rigor played a vital role in increased student achievement. Teacher 1 stated: "He always wanted curriculum to be rigorous . . . he just has always encouraged the teachers to take it to the next level so that you are keeping students engaged."

### *Barriers*

This theme reflected the barriers Mr. Rainey and teachers perceived he faced as he led Elway to gains in student achievement and a top five CCRPI score for all Title I high schools in the state of Georgia. Mr. Rainey faced complex situations as principal, endured stress, and experienced periods when he had limited control of key functions within the school. Through it all, he was ultimately the person held accountable for student outcomes. Teachers perceived that he faced some political setbacks as the principal and expanded on how he managed the organization through times of turmoil. Teachers also stated they believed he faced the barrier of being an outsider in the small South Georgia community and had to work at gaining respect and acceptance.

Principals at different schools can face vastly different barriers, which expands the importance of leaders looking at systems as a whole and strategically thinking through complexities to increase student achievement (Hallinger & McCary, 1990). One of the ways the principal tried to avoid these situations was by thinking through what a decision might look like in the future. He stated: "Something that I guess would be a skill or strength of mine is being able to see the ramifications of doing things." He used foresight, as outlined by Spears (2004), when making decisions for the school, whether

the decisions were about adjusting the bell schedule or changing the sequencing of classes students would take. Anticipating questions often gave him leverage, as he always had answers for his constituents when they analyzed his decisions.

Both Mr. Rainey and teachers agreed many of the major barriers he faced in his job were political ones. At times, he was given limitations to his power from the school board when it came to hiring decisions and allocations for positions. Bolman and Deal (2003) outlined a political frame for leaders. Within this frame, leaders are challenged to recognize and work with informal networks in order to solve organizational problems. Mr. Rainey became familiar with this frame and learned to deal with politics. Within this frame, the leader is required to “build coalitions, loyalty, and negotiation skills” (Howard, et al., 2009, p. 25). The relationships Mr. Rainey formed, many using characteristics outlined by Spears (2004) as servant leader characteristics, helped him to both endure and overcome many such barriers he faced as principal.

Another obstacle teachers believed Mr. Rainey had to overcome was becoming the principal at the school and not being from the area. Although he had been at the school for at least five years prior to becoming an administrator, teachers still saw his background as a challenge in the small community. Vidich and Bensman (2000) analyzed the details of the inter-workings of small rural communities. They explored the tendency for such communities to cling to traditional values and to be closed off to change. Teachers perceived that Mr. Rainey had to face this barrier early on as the principal of Elway. One teacher elaborated by stating:

We have a lot of, I don't know, almost the good ol' boy kind of mindset here.

And some of that goes back to I don't even know how many years. So, I think that some of those challenges include overcoming some of those old mindsets.

Teachers believed many of the traits the principal displayed may have helped overcome these barriers. Specifically, they stressed his ability to listen, clearly communicate, to be visible, and to include others and their ideas. He invested in the growth of those around him on his team.

#### Limitations of the Study

This single case study is limited to the honesty and accuracy of the data provided to the researcher from the participants. A triangulation of data was used to combat this limitation of dependability. Data were collected by interviews, observation, and by the collection of school documents. Patton (2002) recommended researchers compare what a participant may say in public to what they say in private. Both interviews and the observation of the principal in his school setting allowed the researcher to compare what the principal said were his goals and how he went about communicating those goals to his staff. Numerous times throughout the process, the researcher was able to both document and recall observational situations that confirmed information provided in interviews. For instance, the principal stated he was drawn to the relational side of his work. When observed, the principal spent a great deal of his time within the school interacting with staff and students, which would corroborate this statement.

This case study was focused on the experiences of the principal, the barriers the principal faced, and the strategies he used for student achievement in the Title I high school he administered. Stake (1995) confirmed how a deep understanding of a single

case can garner data that are worthwhile, and this particularization can benefit many. Although leadership situations in high schools will vary, the documentation and understanding of how the experiences of this principal, the barriers he faced, and the strategies he used in his school should adequately transfer to other organizational leaders. Denzin (2001) also advocated for “deep descriptions” within the text of the work to ensure transferability. The researcher attempted to use such descriptions to describe the principal’s experiences, barriers faced, and the strategies he used for student achievement in his school.

Another limitation of the study could include the snowball strategy used to recruit teacher participants. In the first interview with the principal, he was asked to suggest teachers or other colleagues who no longer worked with him and could be interviewed for the study. The principal commented on how he previously was the K-12 principal and was no longer over the elementary or middle school; however, there were teachers still working in these schools whom he had supervised. The principal provided the researcher with these teachers to interview. Considering they were suggested by the principal, this could have limited teacher participants to teachers whom the principal was comfortable with or those with whom he had better relationships.

This case study was also limited to only formal interviews conducted with the principal and teacher participants. Other data and information could have been garnered by expanding the interviews to include students and parents. This inclusion was not feasible in this study due to time constraints and IRB regulations related to interviewing minors.

This researcher's presence and the interactions I had with all participants also could have led participants to relate certain issues but also to ignore others. The limitation was somewhat combated by the researcher's spending time on site and observing and comparing what people said to what he could observe. However, due to time constraints within the study, the researcher spent a week on site, not months or years.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative case study provided a small piece of new knowledge to the overall context of literature on leading a Title I school and how to strategize for student success in such a school. The purposeful selection process of the principal helped to ensure new knowledge could be gained from the study. After data were analyzed in detail, the following recommendations can now be made to continue exploring successful school leadership practices in Title I schools.

I suggest a multi-case study using the principals of the entire top five Title I schools ranked by CCRPI score in the state of Georgia would garner different perspectives, as it most likely would include schools from various parts of the state with vastly different student populations. Discovering the experiences of, the barriers faced, and the strategies used by these principals in a multi-case study would help to derive what was similar and different to their approaches. This study provides data that may benefit principals and agencies who train principals.

Additionally, some interesting outcomes from the data collected were how Mr. Rainey considered himself a servant leader and displayed many of the characteristics Spears (2004) outlined as reflective of a servant leader. Many of the 10 traits outlined by Spears (2004) reflected the ability to communicate, listen, empathize with, and gain the

trust of others in the organization. Other traits Spears (2004) outlined belong to leaders who use foresight and strategy to move their organizations in positive ways, which can easily tie in to complexity and strategizing with using bounded instability within organizations to create innovative practice (Stacey, 1992; Tetenbaum, & Laurence, 2011). The data indicate Mr. Rainey made some significant innovative strides within his organization during times of leadership instability at the district level. I would hypothesize a positive outcome of servant leader characteristics could be the building of trust within the organization. This trust within the organization can then become important for leaders who attempt to use foresight and persuasion to steer their organizations to positive change and growth. Leaders who hone this style could perhaps use perceived organizational setbacks as opportunities, as Mr. Rainey did in this case.

Research into how true servant leaders can use the combination of characteristics derived by Spears (2004) through instability and perceived barriers for positive organizational outcomes could be beneficial to leadership literature. By seeking out leaders who identified themselves as servant leaders, the researcher could explore how and if the leaders used Spears' (2004) outlined traits to gain trust in their organizations. The proposed study could then also explore if and how these leaders used particular characteristics outlined by Spears (2004) to deal with complexity within their organizations. In the current case study, it appeared the advantageous servant leader could use particular characteristics within complex systems to drive innovative practice and the potential of positive outcomes by harnessing such instability.

## Final Conclusions

Leading a secondary school to successful gains in student achievement is complex and complicated work (Fullan, 2008b). There are barriers every principal will face, and these barriers will be unique to different districts and school settings. Mr. Rainey has faced his share of barriers as principal. From finding ways to motivate and move his teachers to facing decisions that were contradictory to his beliefs from his school board, he has endured some setbacks. So far, he has found ways to overcome these barriers.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) shared how leaders must be led by a strong vision of where their organization should go. Fullan (2003) also suggested a principal should have a moral imperative in his or her work to guide them. Mr. Rainey spoke specifically about the experiences he wanted the students in his school to have. He wanted these experiences to be personalized to the student's needs, and he also expressed his vision to create an environment where every student would have the opportunity to be successful. When asked about his vision, one teacher said there is no doubt the principal wants to see students succeed. According to Kouzes and Posner (2006), "Leadership is personal. Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow" (p. 50; 52). A section of their book spoke to a leader's legacy being directly related to the types of relationships he or she can develop. Hock (1999) also posited about the importance of having a relationship with constituents, as well as most importantly with superiors. The support of superiors can be one of the most important elements in establishing and having the support needed to fulfill objectives and goals. Mr. Rainey spoke to the fact that the relational side of the job of principal was part of his calling. He considered himself a servant leader. Although servant leadership and Spear's (2004)



work were not initially considered in the conceptual framework for the study, Mr. Rainey's self-identification as a servant leader and the descriptions of him from teacher participants made the leadership model an important area of exploration. Spears (2004) outlined specific characteristics he believed quality servant leaders would encompass. Data indicated he displayed most of these 10 characteristics. He appeared to be very intuitive when it came to the best way to relate to those who he works for and with. Teacher 3 stated she "had never heard anyone say a negative thing about [him]." My experiences tell me this is a rare occurrence in any leadership position, much less the principal of a school. Through observation, I saw how genuine Mr. Rainey interacted with a variety of audiences. Through this genuine nature, it appeared trust had been developed between him and those he worked for and with. This trust allowed him to be open and honest with people. They took constructive criticism because they believed he cared and had their best interests and the best interests of the students at heart.

It should be noted, however, that some literature sees servant leadership as counter-productive to organizational health. McCrimmon (2010) outlined servant leadership as paternalistic and implies it caters to employees, which can be counterproductive to organizational health. He also stated how, unfortunately, leaders who engage themselves as serving their employees may still be the ones to some day fire them. McCrimmon (2010) contended this will then cause disconnect between what these leaders have been saying to employees and the actions they take. He further stated servant leadership might set the leader up for a lack of authority within the organization.

Fullan et al. (2006) goes into great detail about how the principal should be an instructional and change leader and should push for strong classroom instruction in their

schools. Mr. Rainey expressed his goal was to have students who were engaged in rigorous content on a daily basis. He actively worked with teachers in curriculum, lesson planning, questioning students, and data analysis. Although he believed this was one of his weaknesses when becoming a principal, the data collected implied his focus on instructional leadership and professional development for teachers was a major factor in the school's improvement in student achievement. His direct strategies that related to instructional leadership included group work on disaggregating both macro and micro school data, collegial planning of units, and teachers talking through each unit with the principal and other colleagues, detailed curricular planning in each content area, and time and space being provided for teachers to form mentor relationships with students. Personalization is also a key focal point for the school. Students are provided with graduation plans and given opportunities to accelerate their learning through hybrid and online classes in ways that meet their personal needs. These strategies can be directly tied to Elway's increased graduation rate and improved CCRPI score.

This research perhaps brings new connections that can possibly be made in leadership literature. The work of Spears (2004), Jit, Sharma, and Kawatra (2017) suggested servant leaders can bring a sense of emotional health and a greater commitment from followers to the organization. Findings in this study indicate Mr. Rainey's organization benefitted from his servant leadership style. Teacher participants commended his strong communication style, his empathy, and his dedication to his staff, and how these traits brought trust to the organization. Spears (2004) also gives characteristics for servant leaders such as persuasion and foresight, which are less discussed in leadership literature. Stacey (1992) and Tetenbaum and Laurence (2011)

have conducted research on how leaders may use bounded instability within their organizations to increase innovation and move organizations to positive gains. Stacey (1992) suggested some of the bounded instability could be leader produced to move organization to this state. Organizational chaos theory often relates to using organizational structural changes to make followers reassess and work together to move back toward a stable environment, which in turn theoretically makes teams think differently and often innovatively to gain back organizational stability. There is no evidence Mr. Rainey created his own instability per se; instead, he used organizational instability to his advantage. Over his tenure as principal, there had been a revolving door at the superintendent position. Through these changes, he was able to make numerous organizational changes that helped to increase student achievement at the school. It is fair to speculate his position as a servant leader in his organization has garnered a great deal of trust within the school and perhaps better positioned him to make strategic moves when given opportunities with the bounded instability that occurred with numerous changes at the top of the organization.

The researcher's strongest conclusion from the study is the importance of the relational element. Leadership studies tend to focus a great deal on the strategy itself. Many studies seek out the program, initiative, or magic formula that will create the needed result. To an extent, this is what I expected from the study. I expected to hear that if a leader does this, chances are these will be the results. I knew, but Mr. Rainey reinforced to me, there is no one program or formula that can increase student achievement. It takes human spirit to accomplish these goals in education. It takes relationships, building trust, and working together while holding each other accountable.

Programs and initiatives may often come and go, but as Kouzes and Posner (2006) stated, people will always choose whom they follow. It is possible people followed Mr. Rainey because of the attention, genuine care, and general concern he showed them. They invested in him because he invested in them first.

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Appendix A

Valdosta State University Participant Consent Form

## Consent to Participate in Interviews

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “*A Qualitative Case Study of How a Title I High School Principal Strategized for Student Achievement,*” which is being conducted by Andrew Cooper, a student. The purpose of this study is to analyze a high-performing, Georgia Title I high school principal who has participated in Georgia’s school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement, and determine the lived experiences of the principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving student achievement. The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Andrew Cooper at [awcooper@valdosta.edu](mailto:awcooper@valdosta.edu). This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-259-5045 or [irb@valdosta.edu](mailto:irb@valdosta.edu).

Appendix B

Valdosta State University Protocol Exemption Form

