The Role of District Leaders in Improving Achievement and Equity: How District Leaders Craft Policy Coherence

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THE ROLE OF DISTRICT LEADERS IN IMPROVING ACHIEVEMENT AND

EQUITY: HOW DISTRICT LEADERS CRAFT POLICY COHERENCE

Dissertation in Practice by

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Education

May, 2016

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Abstract

District leaders are attempting to navigate unprecedented federal and state policy pressures to create a coherent plan for improvement with limited guidance from research. Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) identified establishing policy coherence as one of four essential roles in systemic reform performed by district leaders. This qualitative case study explored how leaders in one Massachusetts public school district that had demonstrated signs of improving achievement and equity attempted to establish policy coherence.

Drawing primarily upon semi-structured interviews, this study found that district leaders enacted the role to varying degrees in ways that were consistent with Rorrer et al. (2008). In particular, building leaders were much less apt to respond to external policies in a proactive and deliberate manner. Furthermore, district leaders worked to mediate policies in service to local goals and needs in a variety of ways. Recommendations include how district leaders can enact the role in a more proactive and deliberate manner while setting clear goals and developing collaborative partnerships with schools, all which allow them to craft coherence more effectively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Vincent Cho (chairperson); Dr. Lisa (Leigh) Patel and Dr. Maryellen Brunelle for your feedback, encouragement and support throughout this process. Dr. Cho, in particular, guided us through our research coursework with a critical eye, sage advice, and a sense of humor. I would also like to recognize Dr. Diana Pullin for getting us started on our doctoral journey. The courses with Dr. Pullin were invigorating to me due to their balance of intellectual rigor and constructive feedback and support. I appreciated her ability to model great teaching at the university level. I would like to thank Dr. Jackson for encouraging me and for his gracious support throughout the process and my entire career in Holliston. Thank you to the entire PSAP 2016 cohort for their collegiality and camaraderie. Especially, I would like to thank my team: Cathy, Pete, Lindsa and Zach. It has been a privilege getting to know all of you and completing our study as group.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to recognize my family- my wife, Jen, and my now six and four year old children, Emma and Ben- for their love and support. Jen, I could not have done this without your support; and I look forward to recapturing our weekends as a family again.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem and Purpose

District leaders are charged with the formidable yet important task of improving achievement for all students. On one hand, federal and state high stakes accountability policies provide a sense of urgency to improve schools systemically. On the other hand, district leaders feel internal and societal pressures to reform in an effort to realize higher and more equitable educational outcomes.

Progress along these fronts has been uneven. Although nationwide achievement has increased across the board, the achievement gap remains pervasive (Chudowsky, Chudowsky & Kober, 2009). Low-income, Black and Latino students and students with disabilities (SWD) continue to experience inequitable learning opportunities, higher discipline rates, lower standardized test scores and higher dropout rates as compared to Asian and White students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Underachievement not only affects one's ability to be a productive member of a democratic society, but also threatens the overall ability of the United States to maintain a well-informed citizenry and compete in the global marketplace (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Koski & Reich, 2006).

In response to such issues, districts are often considered critical to sustainable, systemic change in achievement among all students (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). In these efforts to

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[1] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Peter J. Botelho, Peter J. Cushing, Catherine L. Lawson, Lindsa C. McIntyre, and Zachary J. McLaughlin

increase achievement and advance equity systemically, the functions of superintendents and their district leadership teams have evolved significantly (Rorrer, et al., 2008). District leaders have shifted from managerial and monitoring functions to taking on complex new roles as leaders of learning (Honig et al, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

However, there is limited support from policy and research for district leaders regarding how to enact these important new roles (Leithwood, 2010; Weinbaum, Weiss, & Beaver, 2012). First, accountability policies call for districts to close the achievement gap, yet provide little practical guidance for district leaders. Instead of useful guidance, these policies rely on testing, sanctions and public shaming as the main instruments for improvement (Goertz, 2001; Mintrop, & Sunderman, 2009; Weinbaum, et al., 2012). Secondly, educational research on district efforts to improve achievement and equity fails to address the complexity of district reform and, as a result, is limited in its usefulness (Leithwood, 2010; Trujillo, 2013). For example, research primarily offers lists of characteristics of effective reform districts without being able to determine which particular characteristics actually result in achievement gains. Consequently, it is difficult to apply these general findings to very different contexts with a high likelihood of success (Leithwood, 2010). Additionally, although some of the research has strived to provide more specific and practical guidance for district leaders, these studies tend to be overly simplified and decontextualized (Trujillo, 2013). For example, they tend to concentrate simply on raising standardized test scores as an indicator of success. Furthermore, these studies largely ignore the social and political context within the district as well as the historical, social and political realities surrounding the district, all which impact the

district leaders' reform efforts. Consequently, district leaders risk responding to policy pressures and interpreting and applying research guidance in a manner that fails to meet the current complex needs of the particular districts in which they serve.

Thus lies the problem: district leaders are responsible for designing and implementing complex systemic change aimed at improving achievement for all and advancing equity, but with a dearth of useful guidance from policymakers and researchers. Accordingly, the main purpose of this project was to explore the work of district leaders in improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide. In doing so, we explored to what degree the actions of a district leadership team reflect an enactment of the four essential roles for district leaders in educational reform as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008).

Rorrer et al. (2008) highlight four key dimensions of district leadership: providing instructional leadership; reorienting the organization; establishing policy coherence; and maintaining an equity focus. In order to address this purpose, the individual studies (Botehlo, 2016; Cushing, 2016; Lawson, 2016; McIntyre, 2016; McLaughlin, 2016) of this research team were organized according to this framework (See Table 1)

In the final dissertation in practice, each of these individual studies posed unique research questions, reviewed literature and methodologies unique to the individual study and reported findings and discussion related to the individual study.

Table 1.1

Individual Studies According to Dimensions of District Leadership

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Dimensions	Focus	Investigator
Instructional Leadership	Generating Will	Lawson
	Building Capacity	Cushing
Reorienting the Organization	District Culture	McLaughlin
Establishing Policy Coherence	Policy Coherence	Botelho
Maintaining an Equity Focus	Equity Focus	McIntyre

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Literature Review

The goal of narrowing achievement disparities across the nation has been a central focus of educational reform for decades. This review will briefly discuss issues relating to district leaders' work in narrowing achievement disparities and advancing equity. First, we describe student achievement and its importance. Second, we discuss the importance of equity, the relationship between inequity and achievement disparities, and how public school districts can inadvertently promote inequitable practices. Third, we discuss why district leaders are important actors in improving achievement and equity and how they are currently working to narrow disparities. Lastly, we will review the theoretical framework that informed this study.

The Importance of Student Achievement

Often measured by test scores, student achievement is viewed as a predictor of other educational attainments, including: grades, graduation rates, and college acceptance rates (Cassidy & Lynn, 1991; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia & Nolly, 2004). Achievement can serve as a gateway or a barrier to social and occupational mobility (Brown, 2003; Cassidy & Lynn, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Skrla, et al., 2004). Some researchers have

illustrated the importance of achievement by examining the outcomes of students from disadvantaged demographic groups who have experienced persistently low achievement levels (Ewert, Sykes, & Petit, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Holmes, & Zajakova, 2014; Xia & Glennie, 2005). Many of these studies found that low achieving students are more likely than higher achieving students to drop out of high school, and are in turn more likely to attain unskilled, low-wage jobs, be unemployed, on welfare, and/or incarcerated (Brown, 2003; Ewert et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Penfield, 2010; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

Darling-Hammond (2010) extends the importance of achievement to a broader level. She claims that persistently low achievement jeopardizes our nation's position as a competitor in a globalized economy that is increasingly dependent on a professionally skilled workforce. Policy makers and scholars who share Darling-Hammond's concern have engaged in long-standing debates about why some student groups are consistently outperforming others and what can be done to remedy this problem (Brown, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010; NRC, 1997). At the forefront of these debates is the concept of equity (Noguera, 2007; Ready & Hawley, 2003).

The Importance of Equity

Equity is believed by some scholars to play an important role in supporting student achievement (Noguera, 2007). While educational equity is defined in many different ways (Espinosa, 2008), it generally involves the fair and just (Green, 1983; Gottfried & Johnson, 2014) distribution of educational resources in order to ensure learning opportunities that support *optimal* achievement outcomes for all students (Kahle, 1998; Kelly, 2012; Noguera, 2007; Springer, Houck, & Guthrie, 2007). To best

understand the role of equity in supporting achievement, it is first important to understand the relationship between inequity and disparities in achievement, commonly referred to as the achievement gap.

Achievement disparities as a reflection of inequity. A substantial amount of research on the achievement gap suggests that existing disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students is a reflection of educational inequity (Dentith, Frattura, & Kaylor, 2013; Dunn, 1968; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton & Morrell, 2002; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015). The achievement gap first became apparent in the 1960s when public schools began to publish the results of achievement tests (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Ipka, 2003). Access to test scores provided scholars with a mechanism for discerning discrepancies in student achievement patterns among different demographic groups. Findings revealed a gap in performance between White, advantaged students and students from disadvantaged and different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Brown, 2003).

At the same time, the release of the *Equality of Equal Opportunity Study* (Coleman, et al., 1966), known as the *Coleman Report*, highlighted the relationship between equity and achievement by exposing the existence of racial inequities regarding the educational opportunities afforded to students in public schools (Kober, 2001; Wong & Nicotera, 2004). Despite significant efforts to eliminate educational inequities (*Brown v. The Board of Education,* 1954; The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), 1965), the achievement gap not only continues to persist but has also grown to include students with disabilities (SWD) and English Language Learners (ELL) (Brown, 2003, Chudowsky, et al., 2009).

For example, recent NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores (NCES, 2013) indicate that students who performed at proficient or above on the eighth-grade mathematics test vary significantly by race (45% of white students; 21% of Hispanic students; 14% of Black students; 5% of ELL students), eligibility for free and reduced lunch (19% of eligible students; 48% of non-eligible students) and disability status (8% of disabled students; 49% non-disabled students).

The eighth-grade NAEP Reading test revealed similar trends in performances at or above proficient by race (46% of White students, 22% of Hispanic students, and 17% of Black students), eligibility for free and reduced lunch (19% eligible; 48% non-eligible) and disability status (9% of students with disabilities; 40% of students non-disabled students). Furthermore, Ingels and Dalton (2013) found that between 2009-2011 dropout rates for Black students (4.3%) were four times higher than Asian students (0.3%) and almost twice as high as White students (2.1%).

District practices that create inequity. There is some disagreement among scholars about whether achievement disparities are more strongly affected by educational inequity or inequities that exist outside of school (Carter & Welner, 2013; Coleman et al., 1966; Holmes & Zajakova, 2014). Nevertheless, there is common agreement that public school districts can perpetuate, sometimes unknowingly, disparities in student achievement by supporting inequitable practices (Kahle, 1998; Gregory, et al., 2010). The ways districts promote inequitable practices can be determined by the prevalence of opportunity gaps (Dentith et al., 2013; Hehir, Grindal & Eidelman, 2012) and outcome gaps (Ewert, et al, 2014; NCES, 2014) between different groups of students.

According to Noguera (2007), learning inequities create opportunity gaps that lead to low levels of achievement for certain students. Opportunity gaps span educational resources, school conditions, school curriculum and the level and intensity of instruction (Dentith et al., 2013; Dunn, 1968; Oakes et al., 2002; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015; Wang, 1998). Opportunity gaps can be seen by examining who has access to quality teachers, enrollment in honors, advanced placement and "gifted" classes and who does not (Albano & Rodriquez, 2013; Burris & Welner, 2005; Hehir et al., 2012; Jaafar, 2006; Lee, 2012; Welner, Burris, Wiley & Murphy, 2008). Isenberg et al. (2013) in the study, *Access to Effective Teaching for Disadvantaged Students,* found that free lunch students do not have the same level of access to effective teachers compared to non-free lunch students. Findings further suggested that inequitable access to quality teachers contributed two percentile points to the difference in student achievement scores between the two groups.

One way to determine the presence of opportunity gaps is to look at whether or not various educational data is proportionately or disproportionately represented by different groups of students (Gregory et al., 2010; Noguera, 2007). Disproportionality occurs when data is underrepresented, or overrepresented by a certain student demographic relative to the overall student population (Gregory et al., 2010; Lee & Ransom 2011; Noguera, Hurtado & Fergus, 2012; Penfield, 2010). For example, minority children and children from economically challenged homes are disproportionately overrepresented in special education programs compared to other groups of students (Dunn, 1968; Holtzman & Messick, 1982; Kunjufu, 2007; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013; Piechura-Couture, 2013). Students with disabilities and minority students receive discipline at disproportionately higher rates when compared to White students (Noguera,

et al., 2012). Minority and Special Education students also have disproportionately higher dropout rates than White and Asian students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCES, 2014). On the other hand, rates of admission to undergraduate, graduate and professional programs are disproportionately underrepresented by Black, Hispanic and Special Education students compared to White and Asian students (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006, NCES, 2013).

Some scholars have illustrated the relationship between inequity and achievement disparities by examining outcome gaps, or group differences in measurable school outcomes such as graduation rates and test scores (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billing, 2006). Ewert et al. (2014) examined demographic and educational attainment data of incarcerated populations across the country and found that the majority of inmates between the ages of twenty and thirty-four were high school dropouts, male and Black. By adjusting data to include incarcerated populations, Ewert et al. further concluded that conventional educational attainment data, which typically omits incarcerated individuals, creates an illusion of progress that "not only underestimate[s] the high school dropout rate but also underestimate[s] racial inequality in educational outcomes" (p.36). Despite the ways school districts reinforce achievement disparities, many district leaders are attempting to remedy the problem by instituting practices that will promote achievement and equity for all students.

The Importance of District Leaders in Improving Achievement and Equity

The belief that district leaders are important actors in promoting student achievement and narrowing disparities is a viewpoint that emerged in literature during the same time period as the standards-based reform (SBR) movement (McLaughlin &

Talbert, 2003). Prior to SBR, educational reform scholars viewed district leaders as either inconsequential or an impediment to student learning and school improvement (Firestone, 1989; Heller & Firestone, 1995; McLaughlin, 1990). District leaders functioned primarily as regulators and monitors of compliance (Firestone, 1989; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Additionally, widespread views that principals and school-level factors had the greatest impact on student achievement caused many scholars to focus their energy on school-based reform (Leithwood, 1994; Ogawa, 1994), leaving a gap in educational research on district leadership (Honig, 2007).

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* (NAR), which claimed, "the educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (p.9). The release of NAR led to the enactment of standards-based reform legislation known as The Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 and the publication of Goals 2000. IASA focused on high standards for disadvantaged children and Goals 2000 aimed at becoming "first in the world in science and math performance by 2000" (IASA, 1994, §102 (5) (a)). Standards-based reform legislation sought to improve student achievement by requiring districts to implement rigorous academic standards for *all* students tied to performance assessments, monitoring student achievement and holding schools accountable for student progress (IASA, 1994; Linn, 2008; NRC, 1997).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act, brought standards-based reform and the role of district leaders in school improvement efforts, to a new level. Districts were required to report

student test scores by subgroup and were accountable for meeting student achievement targets through the use of sanctions and rewards. Standards-based legislation extended responsibility from the school to the school district, shifting the research lens from school-based reform to systemic reform, and from the role of principals to the role of district leaders in improving student achievement (Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). As a result, research began to acknowledge district leaders as important actors in improving achievement and narrowing disparities across the system (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

For example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) sought to determine what successful reform districts do to achieve systemic change across fifteen urban school districts in the San Francisco Bay area. Their findings suggested that districts leaders play an important role in creating systemic change and that a weak district leadership team limits schools' reform progress. Current research continues to echo the importance of district leadership in large-scale reform (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013; Honig et al., 2010; Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010).

Current leadership actions to improve achievement and narrow disparities. There are many ways district leaders are currently working to improve student achievement and narrow disparities. Some district leaders are focusing solely on increasing high stakes test scores (Srikantaiah, 2009), while others are engaging in complex large-scale efforts to improve teaching and learning (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Rorrer, et al., 2008) and advance equity (Wright & Harris, 2010). This work is described below.

Improving standardized test scores. Pressure from federal and state accountability policies have caused some district leaders to concentrate on improving student test scores without necessarily improving student learning opportunities (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Many district leaders are attempting to raise test scores by supporting the use of educational triage practices, narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test (Berliner, 2011; Elmore, 2004; Jacob, 2005; McLaughlin, Artiles, & Pullin, 2001; Weinbaum, et al., 2012). Districts are also using gaming tactics such as retention, minimizing subgroups, and disproportionately identifying disadvantaged learners.

Jacob (2005) studied the impact of high stakes tests on the Chicago Public School System. Findings suggested that the district raised test scores by supporting increases in special education placements and preemptively retaining students. The district furthermore narrowed the curriculum by steering away from low stake subjects like science and social studies. Improvement strategies that narrowly focus on quickly increasing standardized test scores without also improving instruction in substantive ways can have unintended consequences. Districts can inadvertently reinforce educational inequity, further marginalize underperforming students by restricting opportunities to learn and lead to increases in student dropout rates (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Penfield, 2010). The next section will review how district leaders are working to increase achievement scores and improve educational outcomes for all students by focusing on more substantive improvements in teaching and learning.

Improving teaching and learning. A promising way to improve both student achievement and educational outcomes is to improve teaching and learning (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Louis, 2008). This section will discuss three common leadership moves the

literature suggests district leaders in underperforming districts are making to improve teaching and learning. These moves include: evidenced-based decision making; practicing and promoting instructional leadership; and advancing equity throughout the school system.

Evidenced-based decision making. The literature on large-scale reform suggests there are many ways district leaders are using evidence to improve achievement. Some are using evidence to set strategic goals and motivate change (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Wright & Harris, 2010), while others are using it to inform instructional practice (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). For example, O'Dougherty and Ovando (2010) found that district leaders in an urban California school district making progress towards narrowing achievement disparities used data to expose the problem of underachievement. As a result, the leadership team was able to create a sense of urgency and gain stakeholders' support for reform.

While it is widely understood that the use of data can lead to improved practice, most scholars agree that data provides only the opportunity to inform leadership decisions (Coburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Farley-Ripple & Cho, 2014; Wayman, Jimerson, & Cho, 2012). District leaders must know how to make deep and meaningful contextual connections with data if they are to effectively inform educational practice in a way that leads to improvement. This point is illustrated by Finnigan, Daly and Che (2013), who found that district leaders in a consistently underperforming school district did not appear to see the benefit of using evidence, narrowly defined evidence as student test scores and based improvement decisions on primarily affective information.

Wayman et al. (2012) provides guidance to district leaders by identifying four factors that can build, or limit, a district's capacity for effectively using data to improve student achievement: (a) how data is used, (b) attitudes toward data, (c) principal leadership for data use, and (d) the use of computer data systems. Accordingly, Wayman et al. suggests that districts can work towards becoming a data-informed district by focusing on developing common understandings throughout the system, engaging in professional learning and by investing in computer data systems.

Practicing and promoting instructional leadership. The achievement gap is considered a complex problem of learning that requires educators to make substantive changes to their instructional practice (Gallucci, 2008; Knapp et al., 2010). Many scholars of the NCLB reform era posit that district leaders are most likely to support student learning by acting as instructional leaders (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig, 2007; 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004).

There are many ways district leaders are attempting to transform their roles from monitors of compliance to instructional leaders. District leaders are establishing learning-focused partnerships with principals and schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et. al, 2010). Central office administrators are cultivating the exchange of information across and between multiple levels of the organization by spanning boundaries and acting as brokers of information (Burch & Spillane, 2004). They are promoting a culture of high expectations and continuous learning (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2010), while reorganizing and re-culturing central office to support teaching and learning at all levels of the organization (Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2010). Additionally, district leaders are using evidence as a medium for leadership (Honig et al.,

2010; Knapp et al., 2010). Honig et al. (2010) subsequently found that district administrators are investing in instructional leadership by allocating resources to sustain instructional improvement efforts, supporting ongoing professional learning and responding to operational needs.

Another way effective reform district leaders are executing their role as instructional leaders is to build professional capacity by creating a coherent instructional guidance system while providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for both administrators and teachers (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Skrla, McKenzie, Scheurich, & Dickerson, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the wealth of research on the impact effective instructional leadership can have on improving student achievement outcomes (Leithwood, et al., 2004), the problem of inequitable access to quality instruction must be addressed if achievement disparities are to be narrowed (Isenberg et al., 2013; Kahle, 1998).

Advancing equity throughout the school system. Education is often referred to as the Great Equalizer (Scutari, 2008) and some scholars suggest that public school districts can improve achievement by attending to equity (Hewson, Butler, Kahle, Scantlebury, & Davies, 2001; Rorrer et al, 2008; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012; Turner, 2014). Datnow (2005) contends that the advancement of equity requires systems that support good learning (parent support, equitable OTL, multicultural education strategies); district level involvement; efforts to also build the community's capacity; and linkages between districts and the state.

Studies on effective reform districts illustrate a variety of strategies district leaders are using to advance equity (Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008). By

acknowledging past inequities explicitly, reform-focused leaders are providing opportunities and empowering administrators and teachers to apply potential solutions (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010; Turner, 2014). Leaders are also attempting to advance equity by developing and clearly communicating a vision of all children graduating proficient and college ready (Bryk et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Wright & Harris, 2010).

Wright and Harris (2010) found that eight superintendents in small, culturally diverse districts experienced a 10% reduction in the achievement gap by promoting cultural proficiency throughout the district. Strategies enacted by these superintendents included: developing a culture of high expectations and promoting individualized instruction; interpreting and communicating achievement data through a cultural lens; and implementing targeted professional development and mechanisms for evaluating progress towards goals.

District leaders are furthermore attempting to advance equity by creating socially just and culturally proficient learning communities (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010; Scanlan, 2013; Skrla, et al., 2001; Theoharis, 2007; Wright & Harris, 2010). Leaders who maintain a lens toward social justice can provide the opportunity for all children to perform at uniformly high academic levels by creating a safe and secure school environment for children, regardless of their race and family background (Skrla et al., 2001). For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) studied the educational experiences of 900 at-risk first grade students from diverse backgrounds who displayed multiple challenges in behavior, attention, academic and social development throughout kindergarten. Findings indicated that after

being placed in a first-grade classroom characterized by strong instructional and emotional support systems, the students' "achievement scores and student-teacher relationships [were] commensurate with their low-risk peers" (p.125). Conversely, at risk students placed in less equitable classroom environments had lower achievement and noticeably more conflict with their teachers.

A Theory of District Leaders Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity as Institutional Actors

Previous scholarly work includes a lack of developed theory and is based largely on district effectiveness, which poses oversimplified measures of effectiveness and makes weak causal claims (Leithwood, 2010; Trujillo, 2013). Rorrer et al. (2008) addresses these limitations by proposing a theory of districts as institutional actors in systemic reform. In this view, district leaders affect the organization by assuming four central roles: providing instructional leadership; reorienting the organization; establishing policy coherence; and maintaining an equity focus. The individual studies of this research team were organized according to this framework (See Table 1.2) and responded to limitations in the literature by applying Rorrer et al.'s theory to a specific district in Massachusetts that was attempting to improve achievement and advance equity.

A synthesis of these individual inquiries will not only illustrate how leaders are currently working to improve achievement and advance equity, but it will also provide a an example of how Rorrer et al.'s (2008) theory can be applied to the complex work of systemic reform.

Table 1.2

Framework of Individual Studies

Individual Study	Role	Research Questions
Lawson, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Generating Will	1. How do district leaders build will? 2. How do district leaders then sustain will?
Cushing, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Building Capacity	1. What actions do leaders take to build capacity in the district to improve student learning? 2. How do district leaders prioritize their efforts to build capacity toward advancing equity?
McLaughlin, 2016	Reorienting the Organization: District Culture	1. How do district leaders work to understand culture? 2. How do district leaders work to shape culture?
Botelho, 2016	Establishing Policy Coherence: Mediating Policy	1. What policies are districts likely to enact? 2. How do district leaders make sense of policy challenges that exist in light of local needs and context? 3. In what ways do district leaders work to mediate these policies in order to best serve the goals of the district?
McIntyre, 2016	Maintaining a Focus on Equity	1. What is equity to district leaders? 2. How do district leaders foreground equity for other educators?

CHAPTER TWO[2]

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In conducting this research project, team members shared common procedures for collecting and analyzing data. All team members contributed to the work of data collection, but worked independently when analyzing data for individual studies. Procedures that were unique to particular independent studies are reported in those chapters respectively. The sections below describe the overall study design, procedures for data collection, procedures for data analysis and study limitations.

Study Design

To explore the work of district leaders in improving achievement and advancing equity system wide, this study utilized a qualitative methodology. Understanding that this work is complex and multifaceted, this type of open-ended question is best answered by an approach that does not see a finite set of variables (Creswell, 2013). This study ultimately looked to answer a series of "how" questions concerning the actions of district leaders. To give a holistic answer to these questions, the study methodology needed to be open to multiple data sources and needed to be adaptable to possible new interpretations of data (Stake, 2005).

Specifically, the research team used a case study approach. Case studies have origins in the work of sociologists and anthropologists (Creswell, 2013). These researchers used case study approaches to try to understand the interactions of people within specific contexts. Merriam (2009) defines case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system." The bounded system makes up the case to be studied.

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[2] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Peter J. Botelho, Peter J. Cushing, Catherine L. Lawson, Lindsa C. McIntyre, and Zachary J. McLaughlin

Rather trying to understand "leadership" in general, a case study narrowly focuses on subjects like "leadership in XYZ High School." A single school district delineated the boundaries of our study.

Our study created a "thick description" of one school district that is improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide (Geertz, 1973). This description sifted through layers of details to come to a fuller understanding of the district in its unique context. During this investigative process, researchers paid careful attention to the details of environment as they tried to interpret the meaning of the data they collect. Successful districts, and their leadership teams, are by their nature constantly planning and adjusting their approach based on their staffs, their students and their community. Bounding our study by a single district allowed the research to explore the complex interchange of variables and actors that may be impossible to fully isolate from one another (Yin, 2013).
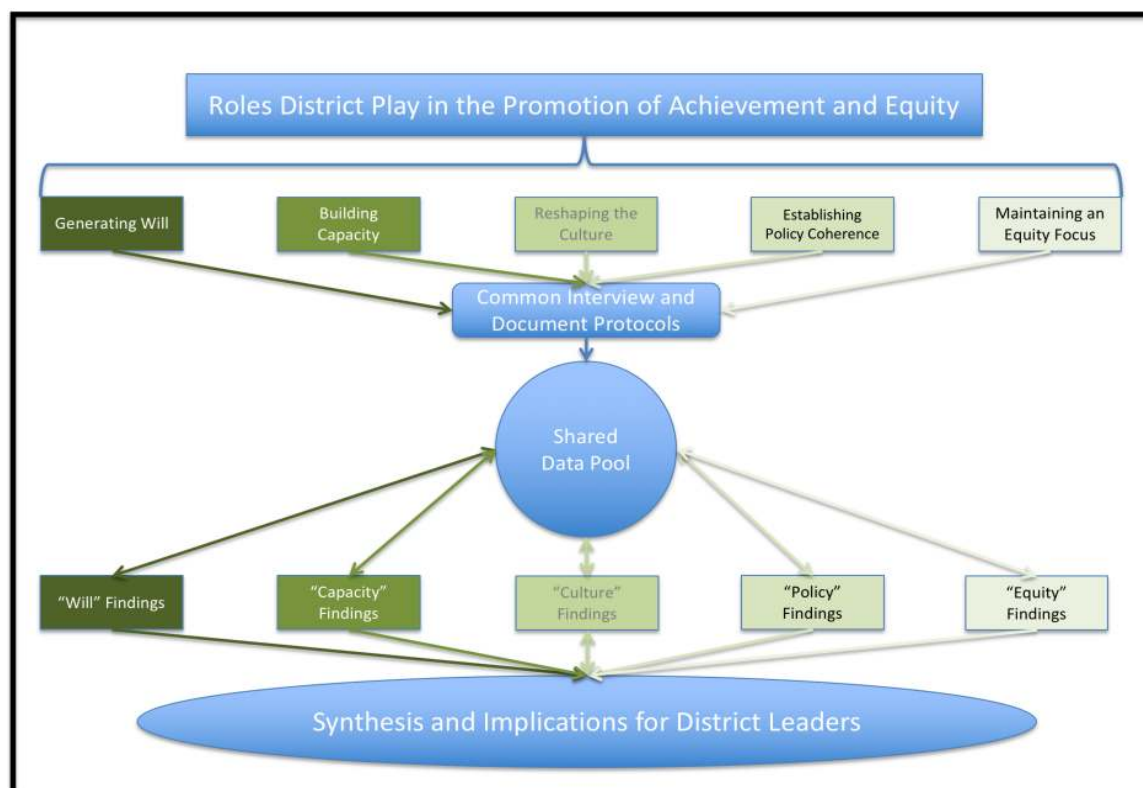
Figure 2.1 Overall study methodological map

Guided by our theoretical framework, this project examined the selected district's efforts to increase student achievement and equity. The work of the district was examined through district leaders that, for our purposes, include the superintendent, mid-level central office administrators and principals. The roles of these leaders were examined through a variety of perspectives (See Figure 2.1).

Site Selection

A study site was selected based on three criteria: a diverse student body, a visible district-wide effort to narrow the achievement gap and a mid-sized student population. To examine the work of district leaders improving achievement and equity system-wide, our district had to have a student body with a large enough population of students from groups that have traditionally demonstrated lower levels of achievement than their peers in order to able to determine if the achievement gap has been narrowed. As such, we used a district with two or more subgroups identifiable on NCLB reporting. The district had shown positive gains in the achievement scores of these groups and a reduction in the achievement gap between these groups and their more affluent, White and/or Asian peers.

Making progress with these groups was not enough. This study sought to understand a district whose improvement appeared to be by design rather than chance. Therefore, the next step in our selection process was to further cull from the districts with a diverse student body by identifying which of those districts publicly recognized improving achievement and equity as a district-wide effort. The site needed to have a district vision, mission, and, or improvement plan that speaks to the desire to accomplish these two goals.

The final step in our selection process was to narrow our focus to mid-sized districts in our state of study (5,000-15,000 students). Due to the heavy emphasis on large urban districts in recent district-level research, the research community has missed the opportunity to obtain rich data from a more manageable site. In particular, studying a comparatively smaller district provided an opportunity to study the district more deeply and examine a higher percentage of district leaders.

Unlike the large urban districts more commonly studied, districts of this size typically have fewer bureaucratic layers separating instructional decision makers and the teachers implementing those decisions; nevertheless, these districts are large enough to have multiple member central office leadership teams. These teams allowed the study to view district leadership collectively through the eyes of several different categories of professionals. Given the manageability of targeted participant groups, the study was able to include a high percentage of staff members who constitute key leadership groups. This strategic choice increased the possibility that the findings could inform theory and guide future research. Furthermore, together with a variety of other theoretically guided studies, this study contributes to literature that can provide district leaders with more relevant and useful guidance as they engage in complex systemic reform efforts.

Contextual background of Wyoma School District. Wyoma is a historically significant suburb of Boston with deeply rooted economic tensions. Wyoma began as a maritime community. Textile factories supplanted this economy in the late 19th century. These factories employed scores of immigrant workers who starkly contrasted the generations of American aristocrats who built estates and lavish summer homes here. These wealthy few attempted to divide the municipality along class lines, an action that

was narrowly defeated. Wyoma remains a disparate community even as innovative companies fill the once dormant factories with highly skilled workers.

During the first decade of this century, Wyoma Public Schools faced severe financial constraints as voters resoundingly rejected operational tax overrides that forced school closures and staffing cuts. Teachers were reduced in force by 18% between 2004 and 2012 while the student population decreased by under 6%. Student to teacher ratios increased by over 15%. Recent enrollment increases have not been matched with teacher hires: the student to teacher ratio is currently behind the state by over 10%. Wyoma voters have supported over $200 million of school construction throughout the past decade.

Data examined from the decennial census reveals stability in demographics and population growth. While Wyoma's population has grown by approximately 3% since 2010, the school district has seen enrollments grow by 6% over the same time period. Since 2001, the White enrollments decreased by 13% while Hispanic enrollments increased by 500%. Students who are Hispanic and Limited English Proficiency are 80% more likely to drop out of high school when compared to their white peers. Thirty percent of district students receive either free or reduced meals. These students are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school than their peers. Asian and African American enrollments have remained static with insignificant annual changes of under 3%.

Data Collection

Case study data included interviews and reviews of documents collected from July to October 2015.

Interviews. In order to understand the perspectives of district leaders, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from the district. Respondents included the superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of special education and pupil personnel services, finance director, principals and instructional coaches (see Table 2). Each participant was individually interviewed for 45-90 minutes.

The interview protocol explored respondent perceptions of district leaders improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide. Flowing from each unique conceptual framework, our protocol specifically studied the ways district leaders generate will, build capacity, reshape culture, establish coherent policy and maintain a focus on equity while pursuing those goals (See Appendix A).

In order to support question validity, cognitive interviews were employed to identify problems in the interview protocol and design stronger questions (Singleton & Straits, 2012). Specifically, think-aloud interviews and probing techniques were used to understand the way a respondent may process a particular question (Beatty & Willis, 2007).

Table 2.1

Interview Subjects

District Assigned Title	Sub-Group Pseudonym	Overarching Pseudonym
Superintendent of Schools		
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction		
Assistant Superintendent for Student Services	Central Office Leaders	
Finance Director		
Child Welfare & Community Support Director		District Leaders
3 Elementary Coaches		
5 Elementary Principals	School Level Leaders	
Middle School Principal		
High School Principal		

Note: This table represents the leadership structure of Wyoma Public Schools.

These think-alouds were piloted with four central office leaders, principals and other school professionals from outside districts to gauge question effectiveness. This process involved asking the initial question, receiving an answer and asking a variety of follow up probes (Conrad & Blair, 2009). For example, the cognitive interview subject was asked one of our protocol questions, "In what ways has the vision for teaching and learning been used to generate buy-in from staff?" The subject answered the question, then the cognitive interview team asked the subject probing questions such as, "What did you think I meant by 'vision'?" and "I said that I was trying to understand 'generating will. What would be indications that will had occurred?" These reflections influenced the team's process concerning possible instrument adjustments.

Table 2.2

Respondent Characteristics

Job Category	Gender		Years in the District		Years in Current Role	
District Leaders	Female	4	1-3 years	1	1-3 years	2
	Male	1	4-5 years	1	4-5 years	2
			5-10 years	1	5-10 years	1
			More than 10 years		More than 10 years	0
Building Leaders	Female	8	1-3 years	2	1-3 years	4
	Male	2	4-5 years	3	4-5 years	4
			5-10 years	2	5-10 years	1
			More than 10 years	3	More than 10 years	1

Document review. The research team member also reviewed documents to triangulate interview answers. All team members used the district's most recent strategic plan. Individual team members used additional documents, as appropriate, to their investigation. These documents were selected to help shed light additional light on efforts to improve achievement and equity in the district.

Data Analysis

Dedoose software was used to code all data. As transcripts and documents were added to Dedoose, individual researchers did an initial wave of descriptive coding. This first cycle approach summarized the topic of passages with a short phrase (Saldaña, 2013). During this process, individual team members made passes starting from an *a priori* list (Miles et al., 2014) developed from their review of literature concerning their specific role. The goal of this first wave of coding was to chunk data into initial categories. The categories used in this initial stage of analysis consisted of the roles being examined by each researcher: generating will, building capacity, aligning structures, reshaping culture, policy coherence and equity focus.

Additional coding cycles were completed by all of the researchers; however, each team member made the choices of which coding techniques and how many cycles were needed individually (see chapter 3). Second (and further) cycles were designed to create a more narrowed thematic organization of the initial descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013). While the first round of coding identified a variety of concepts to explore, additional cycles were for the purpose of coming to some more generalizable themes.

The study built trustworthiness by completing pair checks, developing analytic memos and focusing on reflectivity (Merriam, 2014). Team members reviewed each other's coding cycles. The research team also shared a single Google document as a repository for reflection on their ongoing process of understanding the case. This journaling included commentary on "reflexivity" which is the process of reflecting on the impact of their role as a human instrument in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

CHAPTER 3[3]

INTRODUCTION

Problem, Purpose and Research Questions

District leaders are attempting to educate an increasingly diverse population of students in an era of unprecedented involvement by federal and state authorities. External policies impose significant demands yet provide district leaders with little support (Weinbaum, Weiss & Beaver, 2012). Research suggests that the pressure that NCLB and state mandates place on districts to increase scores may result in superficial approaches and negative unintended consequences (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). Additionally, current research provides limited guidance to district leaders on how to implement these policies effectively. Consequently, despite well-intended aims, ambitious accountability policies have not significantly reduced the achievement gap (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Instead, they have left district leaders with the problem of figuring out on their own - with limited guidance from policy and research - how to navigate external policy pressures to create a coherent plan for improvement.

This notion of how leaders mediate federal and state policies in light of local needs and context is the essence of policy coherence. Scholars have defined policy coherence as "a process, which involves school and district central offices working together to craft or continually negotiate the fit between external demands and schools' own goals and strategies" (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 19). Policy coherence intersects with sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) in that educators, in the implementation process, make sense of these policies in relation to their local work context while being influenced

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[3] Chapter 3 was authored by Peter J. Botelho

by their own individual experiences and perspectives (Cho & Wayman, 2014; Datnow, 2006; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002).

Accordingly, with the research-based concept of policy coherence as a guide, the purpose of this study is to explore how district leaders attempt to establish policy coherence in their efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide. It is guided by three research questions: What policies are district leaders attempting to enact? How do district leaders make sense of the policy challenges that exist in light of local needs and context? In what ways do district leaders work to mediate those policies in order to best serve the goals and needs of the district?

Literature Review

Perhaps now more than ever, the ability to navigate external policy demands is critical to the work of district leaders. This review will discuss issues relating to how district leaders attempt to establish policy coherence in their efforts to improve achievement and equity. The first section defines policy coherence and its importance in education. The second section reviews how district leaders work to establish policy coherence.

Policy Coherence and Its Importance

In the context of public education, policy coherence can be defined as the process by which district and school leaders align external policy demands with local needs and goals to create a coherent plan for improvement (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Rorrer et al., 2008). Traditionally, policy coherence was viewed as the ability of policymakers to create well designed policy that could be implemented with fidelity to accomplish the aims defined by the policymakers themselves (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Datnow, 2006).

School and district leaders were often viewed as obstacles to effective implementation instead of key actors in the process (Heller & Firestone, 1995; McLaughlin, 1990). However, no matter how technically coherent, research recognizes that implementers reshape policy in the process of implementation in positive, neutral and negative ways (Datnow, 2006; Elmore, 1979; Louis & Robinson, 2012; Spillane, 1996; Werts & Brewer, 2014). This process of reshaping of policy in service to local goals and needs defines policy coherence.

Policy coherence intersects with sensemaking theory in that district leaders, in the implementation process, make sense of these policies in light of the local goals and needs of their schools while being influenced by their specific individual experiences and perspectives. Sensemaking is generally defined as the process by which people give meaning to experience (Weick, 1995). The meaning of information or events is not universally understood; instead, individuals and groups actively construct understandings based upon pre-existing cognitive frameworks (Coburn, 2005; Weick, 1995). In the policy implementation process, in particular, sensemaking can be defined as the manner in which implementers come to understand policies as an interaction among their own knowledge, beliefs and attitudes; the particular context in which they work; and, lastly, the policy messages themselves (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002).

Much of the research around sensemaking in the implementation process in education has focused on how teachers make sense of policy in order to make decisions regarding how to enact these policies (Coburn, 2005). Their decisions are influenced by their pre-existing knowledge and practices and the social and cultural conditions of their schools. Additionally, their response to policies are shaped by the particular needs of

their students and what they believe will be effective in serving them (Palmer & Rangel, 2011). These same principles can be applied to the sensemaking of educational leaders (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002; Werts & Brewer, 2014) and can be used to better understand how leaders mediate these policies during implementation based upon what they believe to be in the best interest of their district (Palmer & Rangel, 2011).

The role of district leaders in establishing policy coherence has been determined to be important for the following reasons. First, schools are inundated with continuous, multiple federal and state mandates, which can result in counterproductive responses if not navigated strategically (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). Second, regardless of how carefully constructed, policies are ultimately shaped at the local level (Louis & Robinson, 2012; Spillane, 1996; Werts & Brewer, 2014). Third, policy incoherence can be a hindrance to systemic improvements (Fuhrman, 1999; Honig & Hatch, 2004). Fourth, district and school leaders are essential to the process of crafting coherence (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Leithwood, 2010; Spillane, 1996). Lastly, establishing policy coherence has emerged as a critical role of district leaders in improving achievement and equity (Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Crafting Coherence: How District Leaders Establish Policy Coherence

District leaders establish policy coherence strategically in their efforts to improve achievement for all students. Foremost, they make meaning of the policies to be enacted and decide the degree to which they align with the district's improvement efforts. Based upon this assessment, they then decide how they will enact them in light of local goals and needs. This core role of mediating policy based upon the local context is at the heart of establishing policy coherence (Honig & Hatch, 2004). In order to mediate policy

effectively, district leaders commonly enact several additional complementary strategies. These strategies include setting clear goals and expectations and partnering with schools to create local district-wide coherence. The proactive and deliberate process of determining a policy's alignment with local needs, the critical role of mediating policy and two complementary strategies commonly used by district leaders when enacting this role will be discussed in this section.

A proactive and deliberate process. In their efforts to establish policy coherence, district leaders navigate a fluid process that is contextual and ideally proactive and deliberate (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008; Spillane, 1996). Honig & Hatch (2004) describe this evolving "process of negotiation whereby school leaders and central office administrators continually craft the fit between external policy demands and schools' own goals and strategies and use external demands strategically to inform and enable implementation of those goals and strategies" (p.19). This process of negotiating coherence differs based upon the context of the district, the particular actors involved and how these actors respond to external policies based upon their unique perspectives.

This process is ideally proactive and deliberate. "Coherence is not simply achieved through implementation of federal, state, or local policy. Instead, policy coherence occurs as district leadership molds policies into district-specific derivatives, which represent an amalgam of external policy and internal goals and strategies" (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 323). In doing so, district leaders take on a "pro-active policy making stance" (Spillane, 1996, p. 65). Rather than local implementers simply reacting to the policies or attempting to always implement them with fidelity, educational leaders

proactively and deliberately consider their options and craft coherence in order to leverage external policies to support local purposes (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Spillane, 1996). When crafting coherence, the response of educational leaders is purposeful, coordinated and strategic (Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005).

Mediating federal and state policies. In order to establish policy coherence, district leaders have the power to mediate federal and state policies in service to local needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Rorrer et al., 2008). All policies are reshaped during implementation, and district leaders play a key role in communicating those policies to schools (Louis & Robinson, 2012). District and school leaders decide what a policy means and then decide how to respond (Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002).

Researchers speak about the continuum of responses in various ways. Spillane, Diamond et al. (2002) describe district leaders' decision to adopt, adapt or ignore policies. Firestone (1989) describes how district leaders and implementers respond in terms of active opposition, passive resistance, passive compliance and active use. Coburn describes how "principals make key decision that shape which [policy] messages they bring in, which messages they emphasize with staff, and which they filter out" (Coburn, 2005, p. 500). In describing how districts strategically engage with government-initiated reforms, Leithwood (2010) expresses mediating policy in terms of complying, supplementing, or engaging. Knapp and Feldman (2012) describe how leaders "facilitate and shape the convergence of internal and external accountability" (p. 687). Regardless of the terms that they use, the scholars above concur that the response to external policy is largely influenced by how implementers perceive policies to serve local needs.

Honig & Hatch (2004), in particular, describe the responses that school leaders make in terms of bridging and buffering. When bridging, district and school leaders embrace all or certain aspects of the policy to leverage it to meet local needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Louis & Robinson, 2012). When buffering, leaders work to shield schools from policies because they conflict with local needs.

Bridging policies. Bridging activities involve the "selective engagement" of external demands to "inform and enhance implementation" of local goals and strategies (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 23). Organizations bridge external policies in several ways. Bridging can include pulling the external environment in and blurring the lines between local and external demands. In doing so, leaders integrate and align external demands with local goals, policies and practices (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). Bridging can also include working to "shape the terms of compliance" by attempting to influence policymakers and regulators (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Local players actively lobby and attempt to shape federal and state policies while communicating regularly with authorities in order to understand and navigate external demands.

Rorrer & Skrla (2005) focus on the bridging aspects of mediating external policies in their study of district responses to accountability. They describe mediators as "leaders who possess the will and skill to respond positively and responsibly to accountability policies" (p. 54). In their study, district leaders reconceptualize high stakes accountability policies to promote high levels of achievement for all, model appropriate use of these policies and support implementers in schools. State curriculum guidelines and annual testing are fully integrated into the work of the district and school. By being proactive

and positive, the districts work to leverage policies while avoiding unproductive responses.

Numerous other studies also describe this bridging response. For example, Firestone (1989) describes the bridging of policies as "active use" where districts embrace and use a policy because it is aligned to its interests. Knapp & Feldman (2012) discuss positive responses as leaders use policies to internalize external expectations, model accountable practices, lead through data and reshape conversations about improving teaching. Spillane & Kenney (2012) describe how leaders couple state and district regulations and classroom teaching by strongly adopting external goals, guidance and tools. Lastly, Leithwood (2010) heralds how successful districts comply, supplement and leverage government initiatives in the interest of district priorities. In doing so, district leaders leverage federal and state initiatives by aligning financial and human resources as well as organizational structures to improve teaching and learning.

Buffering policies. On the other hand, district and school leaders also employ buffering strategies in response to external demands. Buffering aims to protect schools against policies that conflict with their aims (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Louis & Robinson, 2012). Buffering is "not the blind dismissal of external demands but strategically deciding to engage external demands in limited ways" (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 23). It can serve positively to protect schools from the many and spurious changes in state policies and funding (Corcoran, Fuhrman & Belcher, 2001). This purposeful buffering response includes a continuum of actions aimed at ensuring that external policies do not derail local efforts. In some cases, the policy is reshaped significantly to make it more

coherent to local actors (Spillane, 1996). In other cases, policies are ignored or evaded altogether (Kirp & Driver, 1995; Spillane, 1996).

District and school leaders may choose to minimally comply or symbolically adopt external demands by changing language and appearances; or they may fully resist external policies by not participating in programs, seeking waivers, turning down funding, ignoring negative feedback, and, or ignoring policy expectations altogether (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Coaches, as instructional leaders, can mediate the relationship between policy and teacher practice when they buffer policies by providing guidance to teachers about which messages to ignore or comply with symbolically (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012). Responses can also be differentiated by school when district leaders choose to support principals and buffer schools strategically based upon the particular needs of their students (Louis & Robinson, 2012).

Central office instructional leaders can specifically buffer principals from external demands in ways that allow them to focus on instructional leadership work (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, 2010). Specifically, they can relieve principals of specific responsibilities related to external policies and translate external demands to limit the amount of time principals spend sorting through and making sense of them (Honig, 2012). Central office leaders translate external demands for principals by explaining how principals can address them quickly if they are not critical to their role as instructional leaders or reframing them so they directly support improvements in teaching and learning. When district leaders manage their response in service to local improvements, without being damaged by sanctions, these buffering responses can have a positive effect on schools.

Complementary Strategies. In order to mediate policy effectively, district leaders commonly enact additional complementary strategies. These strategies, which include setting clear goals and expectations and partnering with schools to create local district-wide coherence, will be discussed in the following two sections.

Clear goals and expectations for the district. In order to respond to external policy demands in an informed manner, district leaders work with school leaders to set clear goals and expectations for the district. These expectations begin with establishing a district vision to guide subsequent goals (Firestone, 1989; O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010). "In some districts, leaders … will have a long-range vision of where they want their districts to go … Moreover, state policies will be interpreted in light of this vision (Firestone, 1989, p. 156). In districts that genuinely strive to improve achievement for all, district leaders often choose to embrace aspects of external accountability policies which promote high expectations and closing the achievement gap (Louis & Robinson, 2012: Rorrer & Skrla, 2005).

District and schools then use this vision to guide the establishment of goals and strategies for improvement. Honig & Hatch (2004) connect goal and strategy setting explicitly to efforts to craft coherence. Accordingly, developing goals and strategies help break down complex reform into focused, tangible actions while informing efforts to establish coherence. Leithwood (2010) discusses how districts enact targeted and phased school improvement efforts that included concrete and realistic goals and plans for improving instruction. Some districts demonstrate the use of evidence to set strategic goals (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Wright & Harris, 2010), while others use evidence to inform instructional improvements (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). These vision and goal

setting processes focus district efforts while informing leaders how to respond to external policy demands.

Collaborative partnerships and local coherence. In addition, in their efforts to establish policy coherence, district leaders tend to nurture collaborative partnerships with principals and schools instead of taking on a traditional authoritative tone (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig et al., 2010; Louis & Robinson, 2012). First, district leaders support schools in establishing goals, buffer schools from external demands that do not match with those goals and develop capacity within each school to reach those goals (Honig & Hatch, 2004). In doing so, some central offices take on new roles to support school leaders in becoming better instructional leaders (Honig et al., 2010). Similarly, district leaders plan and engage in collaborative professional development among district, school and teacher leaders to promote capacity and consistency (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson & Daly, 2008). Second, Honig & Hatch (2004) posit that district leaders could support schools in the search and use of information by providing, vetting and helping to interpret information aimed at accomplishing school level goals. In doing so, district leaders support school leaders and practitioners to effectively use data to inform improvement efforts (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Wayman, Jimerson & Cho, 2012). Lastly, district leaders specifically support school initiatives aimed at improving equity through facilitating improvement efforts, directing resources and providing increased flexibility (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005).

Furthermore, district leaders commonly work to prevent incoherence caused by misaligned external policies by establishing internal local coherence. First, district leaders promote coherence within the district by aligning school and district purposes, goals,

policies and practices across the system (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). When this alignment exists, the work of schools is purposeful and coordinated and resources are allocated strategically based upon local goals and needs (Firestone, 1989; Rorrer et al., 2008). Second, district leaders partner with school leaders to construct a coherent instructional guidance system (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth & Bryk, 2001). District leaders have substantial power in mobilizing and shaping this instructional guidance system through the selection and development of curricular guides, materials and assessments and strategically coordinated professional development and systems of supervision. A coherent instructional guidance system along with improvement efforts that integrate existing policies, procedures, systems and structures are indicators of successful district reform efforts (Leithwood, 2010: Rorrer et al., 2008; Firestone, 1989). It is critical that district leaders work with principals and teachers, those closest to schools, classrooms and students, in order to create this local coherence.

Methods

Guided by the research-based concept of policy coherence, this qualitative case study drew upon interviews and documents collected as part of a larger team research project. A full discussion of the methods employed during the overarching study can be found in Chapter 2. Unique to this individual study is how qualitative data was collected and analyzed.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews. In order to explore how districts leaders were working to establish policy coherence in the district, all interview respondents identified in Chapter 2 were interviewed using a protocol (See Appendix) that included questions that focused specifically on the research-based concept of policy coherence. These

individuals were selected because they were leading efforts to improve achievement and equity in the district. As leaders, they were concurrently held accountable for implementing both district initiatives and state and federal mandates.

The interview protocol explored respondent perceptions of district leaders' attempts to establish policy coherence in their efforts to improve achievement and equity. It was guided by three research questions developed in accordance with the research-based concept of policy coherence (See table 3.1). First, what policies are district leaders attempting to enact? In order to collect data related to this question, respondents were asked directly which federal and state policies they were most focused on implementing. Second, how do district leaders make sense of the policy challenges that exist in light of local needs and context? In order to explore this question, in the team's introductory questions, interviewees were asked about the district vision along with the most important goals and initiatives that the district was pursuing. In addition, respondents were explicitly asked how they thought the policies reinforced and, or conflicted with the goals and needs of this district. Third, in what ways do district leaders work to mediate those policies in order to best serve the goals and needs of the district? In order to address this third research question, leaders were asked how they were working to implement policies in a way that met local goals and needs. In addition, as necessary, respondents were asked how they leveraged or adapted policies to serve local needs and, or were also asked how they implemented policies that seemed to conflict with local goals and needs.

Throughout the data collection process, the team of interviewers discussed the probes that were most effective. Specifically, after the first round of interviews were conducted, the team decided to regularly pose a follow up that asked respondents to

discuss how they imagined their work would be different if no federal and state mandates existed.

Table 3.1

Research and Interview Question Alignment

Research Questions	Interview Questions
What policies are district leaders attempting to enact?	1. What federal and state policies are you most focused on enacting?
How do district leaders make sense of the policy challenges that exist in light of local needs and context?	2. How do you think these policies reinforce the goals and needs of the district? 3. In what ways do you think these policies conflict with the goals and needs of the district?

In what ways do district leaders mediate those policies in order to best serve the goals and needs of the district?	4. How do you implement these policies in a way that addresses local goals and needs? What does that look like?
	     a. How have you leveraged or adapted these policies to meet local goals?
	     b. How do you implement policies that conflict with the current needs and goals of the district?
	     c. If there were no mandates to fulfill, how might the efforts of the district look differently?

Document review. The researcher reviewed the district's strategic plan (2011) as well as district mission and vision statements to triangulate interview data. The documents were found to be useful in understanding the context of the work in the district. However, interviews were the focus of the data collected and analyzed because they were found to be most central to answering the study's research questions.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were initially coded for the topic of policy coherence along with subcodes informed by the literature including the concepts of bridging and buffering as well as whether the leader appeared to be proactive and deliberate in his

response. An interviewee was determined to be deliberate in his response if he explicitly explained how he thought about his role in understanding what the policy meant and how it could be strategically enacted in the district in order to meet local goals and needs. Additional descriptive codes were inductively developed. They included particular policy titles, including accountability policies, educator evaluation policies, English Language Learner policies and special education regulations. Policy examples were further sub-coded based upon how they reflected respondents' perceptions of whether the policy reinforced or conflicted with local goals.

Several additional coding cycles were completed in order to ensure that codes were assigned appropriately. As part of this process, excerpts that corresponded to particular codes were collected and organized using an Excel spreadsheet in order to compare and quantify examples based upon the code and respective respondent. This enabled the researcher to compare examples and view trends and patterns.

Findings

This qualitative case study explored how district leaders attempt to establish policy coherence in their efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide. First, I describe the federal and state policies that district leaders were most focused on enacting. Second, I describe how district leaders made sense of the challenges that existed in enacting those policies. Third, I describe ways that district leaders worked to mediate external policies in their efforts to improve achievement and equity.

Federal and State Demands

The first research question sought to identify the federal and state policies that district leaders were most focused on enacting. In interviews, district leaders reported that

accountability policies (which included high stakes testing and accountability systems) and educator evaluation policies were the most prevalent policy areas of focus. When discussing these two sets of policies, most respondents alluded to the challenges of Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC) testing and some specifically alluded to the development and implementation of the District Determined Measures (DDMs) component of the new educator evaluation system. Policies related to serving English Language Learners and new physical restraint regulations were two additional areas that were discussed as important by central office leaders and those building leaders with populations who were most prominently impacted by these particular policies. Last, several additional policy areas were mentioned by only one or two respondents.

Did Policies Reinforce or Conflict with Local Goals and Needs?

The second research question relates to how district leaders made sense of the policy challenges that exist. In addressing this question, respondents communicated what they thought about the policies that they faced and whether these policies were perceived to reinforce or conflict with the needs and goals of the district. This question led to this one central finding. District leaders varied significantly in their attitudes towards the federal and state policies that they faced. Some district leaders, at times, embraced policies as serving local interests. On the other hand, other district leaders felt policies conflicted significantly with local goals and needs.

With respect to positive attitudes, one central office person lauded the "sense of urgency" that came with being labeled an underperforming "Level 3" school. Two other central office members expressed that they welcomed policies with one noting that

people would get "sloppy" if regulations did not exist. Similarly to some central office leaders, a subset of building leaders spoke about how accountability policies reinforced school and district goals by promoting a sense of urgency to improve achievement. They also praised aspects of the new evaluation system, which focused on good teaching. Lastly, building leaders who had significant English Language Learner (ELL) populations in their schools largely welcomed new policies related to serving these children. For instance, one leader reported that "the ELL piece, I think to us, is actually a blessing in disguise."

At the same time, some district leaders demonstrated a negative attitude towards federal and state mandates. One central office respondent critiqued how testing and accountability practices and other regulations left too little time for play and social and experiential learning. Additionally, the one district leader with consistently negative feelings towards external mandates proclaimed,

> From a state and federal standpoint, I've always said that if they close DESE (the
> Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) for two years and gave us
> all their money, we'd get a hell of a lot more done than what's happening right
> now.

Principals and coaches, too, at times, expressed negative views on the policies that they faced. Several expressed general frustration with the plethora of mandates. For example, one building leader lamented,

> I don't know if people are trying to justify their existence or trying to keep a job
> by coming up with new initiatives and coming up with new requirements for

schools. It's mind-boggling … I think we're all struggling with that in every area.

It's just too much. How do we stay focused on what's essential?

Others building leaders expressed dissatisfaction with specific policies. In particular, they criticized the time students and teachers spent on testing, the burdensome educator evaluation regulations, and the implementation of the new online testing platform (PARCC). One building leader noted, "We did the computer-based version of PARCC and that was months, months of interruption to not only the teachers' schedules but … we, [coaches and administrators], too, were pretty much incapacitated for two months." Another respondent critiqued the new discipline guidelines on expulsions and suspensions. Overall, the data suggested that leaders throughout the district had mixed feelings about external policies and whether they conflicted with or reinforced local goals and needs.

Crafting Coherence: How District Leaders Establish Policy Coherence

Regardless of their attitudes towards the various mandates, the third research question relates to how leaders in the district responded to the policies that they faced. Specifically, in what ways did they work to mediate policies to meet the needs and goals of the district? Below I describe two central findings to this research question. First, I describe the degree to which district leaders demonstrated a proactive and deliberate approach in their responses to mandates. Second, I describe whether their responses tended towards the positive (bridging) or negative (buffering) end of the continuum.

A deliberate and proactive response to federal and state policies. While possessing mixed views on the federal and state policies that they faced, the findings suggested that central office leaders were much more likely to show deliberateness in

their response to these policies. An interviewee was determined to be deliberate in his response if he explicitly explained how he thought about his role in understanding what the policy meant and how it should be proactively enacted in the district in order to meet local goals and needs.

Deliberateness and central office. Most central office leaders expressed that they thought deliberately about the way they crafted policies to fit local goals and needs. For example, one central office leader discussed how he had always worked to craft coherence with federal accountability mandates. He shared that, "when No Child Left Behind came in, our task was to understand No Child Left Behind well enough to force all of the mandates into what we were already doing." He also expressed that someone from central office regularly attended events and information sessions at the state level for the expressed purpose of gaining a clear understanding of policies to be enacted. This understanding allowed leaders to proactively understand the aims and expectations of the policy and what flexibility existed in the implementation process. In doing so, they also developed strategic relationships with state officials. Another central office member expressed thinking about external mandates in terms of, "Great. This is what we have to do. How do we do it the way we want to do it so that it makes sense?" The leader then went on to explain this coherence making process: "You have to have enough understanding about what the state's requiring before you change it. You kind of have to be savvy enough to do that."

General absence of deliberateness of building leaders. On the other hand, only three of the ten building-level individuals expressed having thought deliberately about this crafting coherence role. One of them reported working deliberately to "sift" through

the mandates that he and his teachers faced and "connecting the dots" to make them fit his vision for the school. With respect to responding to mandates in a deliberate way, another noted, "It's hard to articulate how you do it. But I think it's knowing your building and knowing when the right time is to introduce something and [knowing how to] frame it to your staff.... It's strategic. It's thoughtful." A third building respondent expressed positively how the district had taken on this crafting coherence role for some time:

> From the district overall over the last 10 years, … [we have tried to] decrease the focus for staff on what we have to do, or whatever you have to be trained on, and really look into what is it they are asking. They're looking for good teaching practice for all kids.

> On the other hand, other building leaders expressed being so accustomed to the policies that they just accepted them without question. For example, one respondent expressed, "I'm so functioned under that mandate driven way that I guess it's just all that I know." While another reported that I am, "really basically getting marching orders and carrying them through… It's been a challenge to get some of our own initiatives going forward." Nonetheless, regardless of the deliberateness of their response and the way they thought about their crafting coherence role, leaders throughout the district, at times, responded to policies in positive and negative ways by bridging and buffering these policies in an attempt to best serve local needs.

Mediating federal and state policies. Whether acting deliberately or not, the findings suggested that all district leaders worked to mediate federal and state policies to serve interests in a variety of ways. Mediating is the process by which district leaders,

adopt, adapt or ignore policies in order to make them match local goals and needs (Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002). The following sections describe how district leaders employed bridging techniques to leverage policies, buffering techniques in order to protect schools from perceived negative impacts and hybrid responses (both bridging and buffering simultaneously) to make a policy work for the district.

Bridging. Leaders throughout the district consistently reported to bridge policies to serve local needs. Bridging strategies are employed in order to use the policy positively to serve local goals and needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Louis & Robinson, 2012). Most individuals discussed at least one instance in which they bridged accountability or evaluation policies to promote reform. These individuals reported that they leveraged accountability policies to create a sense of urgency and motivate individuals to change. For example, one leader expressed, "The opening [for change] came… when we hit Level 3. There was a sense of urgency. What we were doing wasn't working. We needed to come up with a plan to move us forward." Another concurred,

> The sense of urgency is there. When someone sends you a letter and says your
> school needs improvement and you have to send a letter to every person in the
> district that says they can go to another school if they want to, and, oh, by the
> way, you're busing them there, that creates a sense of urgency for the staff.

These leaders also frequently reported using data, including high-stakes testing data, to identify priority areas and to promote a data-driven culture. One leader reported using the data to uncover an issue with improvement in achievement for their typically higher performing students. For example, she reported,

We have been really looking at the data. And what has happened for us at this

particular school is our tier one kids have been flat. We've made growth … with

our lower tiered students… On the outside, it may look like we're closing the gap,

but really our high flyers are not moving the way we would like to see them

move.

Additionally, leaders discussed how accountability policies were used to influence

changes in curriculum and instruction. For instance, several respondents discussed how

they used accountability data as an impetus for changes in instruction in reading, writing

and mathematics. "We have a writing initiative that we wanted to implement here based

upon some of our older response scores on standardized testing," stated one building

leader. In some cases, the changes were quite extreme. A central office leader discussed

the radical changes in elementary math that were spurred on by some of the successes in

schools with accountability pressures. She explained, "We threw the math books in the

trash. We literally have no text in math. We created units of study [from scratch]." In

some schools, they also practically stopped teaching science and social studies in order to

extend literacy and math blocks.

Lastly, respondents discussed how accountability policies were bridged to

advocate for additional resources in the form of equipment and personnel. For example,

several leaders discussed how the new online testing requirements were used to justify

additional technology resources. Secondly, coaches were instituted in the district initially

due to accountability pressures at targeted schools and then expanded to support

improvements in teaching and learning throughout the district. One coach described how

his position was created, "That's why they actually started my job. The opening came

because … they hit Level 3 [underperforming status]." Lastly, Title 1 funds were directed to target improvements in achievement in early childhood.

     Buffering. Although discussed less frequently than bridging techniques, most leaders in the district noted their efforts to buffer policies in order to protect themselves, teachers and students from perceived negative aspects of the policies that they faced (Honig & Hatch, 2004). In doing so, they discussed attempts to buffer in both general terms and in relation to specific directives.

     Several leaders throughout the district spoke in general about being selective in how policies were enacted. For example, one central office leader expressed the need to protect schools from the multitude of external demands and when to superficially comply:

> I'm not proposing that the district just go gray on everything … but you have to. There's too many... We can't do everything they ask us to do. There's no way. Which ones match what is important to you and then you do them well and which ones do you just comply with and send the data?

Another central office leader reported how he buffered policies by ignoring them, when possible, because the policy did not support the current goals and needs of the district,

> I have to admit, as I've gotten more experienced, I've probably ignored a couple of them [mandates] every once in awhile. When we get something that really does not make any sense, I am willing, if it's not an issue for us in Wyoma, to drag my feet for a while.

     Some building based leaders, too, expressed working to protect their schools and teachers from mandates in general. For example, in response to external policy demands,

one principal reported telling his staff, "Let's not worry about that. What does our school need? What do our students need?" Additionally, building leaders explained how they shielded and supported their staffs in relation to the range of external demands. One noted, "I try not to … [talk about all the mandates] because I can do that behind the scenes… Our time together needs to be about teaching and learning."

Leaders throughout the district also discussed employing buffering techniques towards numerous specific federal and state initiatives. With respect to accountability pressures, some leaders expressed working to prevent high-stakes testing pressures from defining them. For example, one building leader reported,

> PARCC, MCAS, standardized testing… I know that there has to be some accountability, but I think we've gone overboard. If we could just really teach the standards, that's really what I talk to staff about. That's your responsibility to teach those standards and be able to assess those standards. If we're doing that, I don't care about the test. The test will take care of itself.

Others spoke specifically about using coaches and administrators to buffer teachers and students from the technology issues inherent in the new online testing platform. Lastly, district leaders also discussed buffering teachers from the training required by the state for sheltering English instruction for English Language Learning by providing training in-house which would keep them in compliance. For example, one central office leader expressed,

> What we've always done is be aggressive about it. We have one of the SEI trainers that's one of our people, and we will do what we need to do for our teachers. We're, right now, designing how we help them pass the test as opposed

to have to go through all of the training.... It's about finding ways to get done what's needed for Wyoma and making sure that we are in compliance.

Bridging and buffering: a hybrid response. In some cases, it was clear that leaders employed a hybrid of bridging and buffering responses to some policies based upon the needs of the district. The district's response to the new educator evaluation regulations was a perfect example of a hybrid response. In this case, leaders both shielded professionals from the requirements and pulled the policy into their practice in connection to key goals.

With respect to the buffering strategies, the policy was adapted significantly and purposefully using a modified timeline in order to help it work for the district. District leaders protected educators from the onerous, multi-faceted components of the system by adopting a subset of priority indicators and modifying observation requirements to make them more reasonable. Additionally, leaders discussed how the new system was instituted in a deliberately slower fashion than the state desired to reflect what the district could handle at the time. The common assessments used to measure student growth (DDM) portion of the system, in particular, was purposefully neglected for a period of time as common assessments were evolving in the district. Throughout the process, central office leaders worked with union leadership in order to negotiate a system that worked for the district while actively buffering teachers and the union from the state. The contract language was delayed and then, once enacted, reflected the modifications established above. With respect to the DDM component of the new evaluation system, one leader reported:

The real work that was important was figuring out DDMs. My conversation with

the union president was to say, "let's do the language when we're done. We may

not have the language in when we're supposed to, but I'll take a hit for that."

With respect to bridging aspects, despite the delayed timeline and substantive

modifications, in the end, the educator evaluation policy was leveraged to make

improvements in the district. First, respondents reported bridging educator evaluation

policies to develop greater consistency in curriculum, instruction and assessment across

the school and district. The consistency, in particular, with common assessments

supported the data-driven culture that was being promoted in the district. When

discussing how DDMs reinforced district goals, one leader noted:

> We already had a lot of common assessments. In my mind, DDMs are great
>
> because they made us say to teachers, "What are you using for common
>
> assessments across your content area..." Now we want to make sure that we have
>
> the same expectations for kids as outcomes … [using these common assessments]
>
> as a way to do it.

Additionally, it was used to positively push administrators into classrooms while

providing a mechanism for initiating conversations about teaching and learning including

discussions with the small group of teachers who were not improving and responding to

feedback.

Second, some reported that educator evaluation was used to leverage additional

district goals and inform professional development. Some leaders reported using the

teacher goal setting portion of the new system to focus efforts on writing and 21st century

skills. Finally, it was used to inform professional development needs. One individual

reported using the goal setting component of the educator evaluation system by reviewing teacher-developed "goals and then providing the right kinds of professional development" based upon their goals.

Discussion

This study explored how district leaders attempted to establish policy coherence in their efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide. First, the study found that federal and state accountability policies weighed heavily on the minds of district leaders, with high-stakes testing and accountability policies and new educator evaluation policies being the most prevalent areas of focus. Second, district leaders varied in the degree to which they felt these policies conflicted with and, or reinforced local goals and needs. Regardless, however, it was clear that district leaders felt that policies, at times, conflicted with local goals and needs. Third, this study found that despite the plethora of external demands, perceived conflicts and need to mediate policies, few district leaders thought proactively and deliberately about the role that they might have in navigating these policies to best serve local needs. This finding was especially true of building level leaders. Lastly, although district leaders did employ both bridging and buffering strategies, building leaders especially tended to emphasize bridging over buffering techniques.

In light of these findings, future leadership practice needs to strive to more consistently go beyond simply reacting to policies in positive, negative and neutral ways to responding more proactively and deliberately in order to ensure the greatest likelihood that these policies will serve children well (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Spillane, 1996). In addition, to establish coherence, district leaders concurrently need to

set clearer expectations for the district through improved goal setting processes while striving to develop local policies and initiatives in a more locally coherent and collaborative manner.

Establishing Policy Coherence: Developing the Craft

Establishing policy coherence has emerged as a critical role of district leaders in improving achievement and equity (Leithwood, 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008). Furthermore, scholars suggests that crafting coherence among federal, state and local policies is ideally a proactive and deliberate process (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Knapp & Feldman, 2012; Spillane, 1996). However, this study suggest few district leaders, most especially building leaders, thought proactively and deliberately about how they might craft policies in a way that best serves local interests.

Given the literature's recognition of the importance of managing multiple federal and state policies effectively by crafting coherence, central offices should lead efforts to strategically manage external demands (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Rorrer et al., 2008; Leithwood, 2010). This should include an "ongoing investment in the institutional capacity of school and district central offices to engage in practices that may help schools manage multiple external demands productively" (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 27). Although some district and building leaders act deliberately to understand and mediate policy, one should not assume this will be the case without specific attention.

How might this be accomplished? First, in addition to proposing the integration of the practice of policy coherence into graduate level and licensure programs for educational leaders, central office leaders should work to continuously develop this craft in themselves. This includes working as a central office team to break down policies and

understand how they might be bridged or buffered to serve local needs (Honig, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008). However, this work cannot be done in isolation. In order to establish coherence with federal and state policies, school level leaders, too, must be involved (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Principals, whether deliberately or not, shape policy and its implementation by teachers by making "key decision that shape which messages they bring in, which messages they emphasize with staff, and which they filter out" (Coburn, 2005, p. 500). Consequently, central office leaders will be well served to build capacity of their building level leaders to understand and collaboratively establish policy coherence (Knapp, 2008). This might include "providing funds not solely for the implementation of new programs and policies … but for the development of people in schools as the crafters of coherence and in school district offices as supporters of that craft" (Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 27).

Similar to the way that literacy needs to be taught in schools, policy coherence should be explicitly taught and continuously developed in our leaders. Central office staff should provide building leaders with a clear overview of the concepts of policy coherence and mediating policies including bridging and buffering techniques (Honig & Hatch, 2004). They then should model the craft to support the effective and responsible use of this practice at the building level. In addition to this modeling, superintendents should conduct guided, job-embedded exercises (Spillane et al., 2009) in which district leaders together analyze components of a given policy, and their potential impacts, positive or negative. In particular, building leaders need to be guided in understanding what flexibility exists in its implementation (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Honig, 2012). Central office and building leaders then could collaboratively construct strategies to buffer and

bridge policies in order to maximize positive impacts in line with the goals and needs of the district and individual schools (Honig & Hatch, 2004). This might also include identifying mid-level central office staff to act as "brokers" to communicate and create tools which help translate policy into action in schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004).

This study found that building leaders, in particular, tended towards the bridging end of the spectrum and that many building-based leaders expressed being conditioned to comply with federal and state policies, without questioning how these policies might be adapted. However, in order to employ this critical crafting coherence role, building leaders must be encouraged to proactively and responsibly question the merits of policies and supported in mediating policies in order to meet local needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004). In doing so, it will be particularly important to analyze the impact of high stakes testing and accountability to ensure that these policies can be mediated to leverage improvements in achievement and equity while minimizing negative unintended consequences (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005).

Setting Clear Goals and Expectations

In order to enact the process of crafting policy coherence effectively, future leadership practice needs to better develop district leaders' ability to set clear goals and expectations. Research suggests that one cannot enact this critical crafting coherence role if the goals and strategies of the district are not clearly understood and articulated (Honig & Hatch, 2004). These goals and expectations begin with establishing a district vision to guide subsequent goals (Firestone, 1989; O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010). This visioning and goal setting ought to include supporting leaders in using data to identify needs and develop and monitor goals (Wayman, Jimerson & Cho, 2012). Once the vision and goals

of the district are articulated, only then can leaders analyze how policies interplay with the goals and needs of the district so that they can be bridged or buffered based upon this analysis.

Collaborative and Locally Coherent Decision-Making

In addition to setting clear expectations, future leadership practice needs to aim to be more collaborative and locally coherent. Decisions, which impact schools, need to be made collaboratively among central office and building leaders to ensure the greatest likelihood of success (Honig et al., 2010). This will require central office leaders to develop new collaborative partnerships with schools based upon mutual value rather than hierarchical roles (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig et al., 2010; Louis & Robinson, 2012). In doing so, district leaders ought support school leaders and practitioners as instructional leaders (Honig et al., 2010). Principals, who are effective instructional leaders, are better able to bridge and buffer external policies to meet local needs (Louis & Robinson, 2012). As part of this work, central office leaders support schools to effectively use data to inform goals and improvement efforts (O'Dougherty & Ovando, 2010; Wayman et al., 2012).

Furthermore, coherence is not just an issue of navigating external demands. Superintendents need to make sure that there is strong coherence between local district level policies and initiatives and the needs and goals of schools and classrooms (Firestone, 1989; Rorrer et al., 2008). In order to do so, central office leaders will need to invite building level players to the table to collaboratively analyze local policy and develop implementation plans with the same critical eye that is given to critiquing

external policy. If not, the same level of tension might exist between district policies and schools that exists with federal and state policies.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, federal and state policies, including high stakes testing and accountability policies, will continue to inundate our schools. Policy makers and educational leaders would be served well to embrace the benefits of implementers molding external policies to serve local goals and needs. However, district and building leaders should not be left to discover how to enact this critical crafting coherence role. Instead, this study suggests that the role of establishing policy coherence should be explicitly developed and enacted in order to ensure that policies at the federal, state and local levels can be leveraged to realize, not hinder, improvements in achievement and equity in our nation's schools.

CHAPTER FOUR[4]

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the work of district leaders in improving achievement and advancing equity system-wide. In doing so, our research team examined the degree to which the actions of a district leadership team reflected an enactment of the four essential roles of district leaders in educational reform as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008). Cushing (2016) and Lawson (2016) focused on how leaders attempted to build capacity and generate will when providing instructional leadership. McLaughlin (2016) focused on how leaders strived to reorient the organization's culture. Botelho (2016) focused on how leaders worked to establish policy coherence. McIntyre (2016) focused on the extent to which leaders maintained an equity focus in their efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide.

Two central findings emerged following a synthesis of our individual lines of inquiry. First, consistent with research on standards based systemic reform (Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003), our studies found that district leaders played an important role in efforts to improve achievement and equity system-wide. Second, we found the actions of district leaders were consistent with Rorrer et al.'s (2008) theory of districts as institutional actors. Albeit to varying degrees, in their efforts to improve student outcomes, all district leaders were attempting to enact the four reform roles conceived by Rorrer et al.

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[4] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Peter J. Botelho, Peter J. Cushing, Catherine L. Lawson, Lindsa C. McIntyre, and Zachary J. McLaughlin

The following sections will discuss these findings and their implications for both practice and research in light of current scholarship. First, we discuss the three prominent leadership moves leaders made when attempting to improve achievement and equity. Second, we discuss how leaders enacted the four leadership roles as conceived by Rorrer, et al.'s theory. Third, we provide recommendations for practice that can be used to guide the future efforts of leaders seeking to improve achievement and equity system-wide. Lastly, we discuss the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research.

Leaders Played an Important Role in Efforts to Improve Achievement and Equity

Consistent with current educational reform research (Bird, et al., 2013; Honig, et al., 2009; Knapp, et al., 2010), our studies suggest that Wyoma Public Schools district leaders played an important role in efforts to improve student achievement and equity across the system. Public reporting of the district's high stakes test scores, which revealed existing achievement disparities (Brown, 2003), and the Level 3 status[5] of one elementary school incentivized district leaders to implement large-scale instructional improvements. A synthesis of findings from individual lines of inquiry revealed three prominent leadership moves when attempting to improve achievement and equity: leaders (1) provided and supported instructional leadership; (2) implemented evidenced based decision making practices; and, (3) promoted equity across the system. In the next sections we discuss these leadership moves and the potential implications our findings may have on practice in light of current scholarship.

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[5] The Massachusetts accountability system uses aggregate high stakes test scores to designate districts as level 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5. A Level 1 district is the highest performing level, where Level 5, are performing at levels low enough to be placed in receivership by the state. Level 3 districts are considered in need of improvement and qualify for targeted support from the state.

Leaders attempted to provide and support instructional leadership. Similar to Galucci (2008), who considers underachievement a "problem of learning," leaders in Wyoma recognized the need for new knowledge and changes in instructional practice for improving student achievement. In order to realize these types of improvements, foremost, district leaders emphasized the importance of high expectations for learning for all students. This value of high expectations for all students was communicated using a variety of mediums and leaders sought to maintain high expectations by balancing support (professional learning and resources) with accountability (observations and evaluations). In addition to promoting high expectations, district leaders prioritized the development of instructional leadership throughout the district. Our data suggests leaders attempted to provide support by establishing "learning-focused partnerships (Honig, 2012)." These partnerships appeared to exist on and across many levels, (i.e. among central office, principals, coaches, and teachers) and were fostered through professional learning communities (PLCs), data teams, use of common goals and by allotting time for collaboration and planning.

Specifically, central office administrators attempted to partner with schools to develop and deepen the principals' instructional practice by providing job-embedded supports. This was evidenced by the leadership coaching support provided to the principal of the Level 3 elementary school and the addition of a literacy coach[6] position to her school budget. Similarly, a multi-year federal grant program was used to provide

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[6] The coaching model was first implemented at the elementary school designated as level 3, then expanded to another elementary school experiencing an increase of low SES students due to a change in student demographics. The coaching model was expanded over time to include a literacy coach and math coach at all elementary schools and the middle school. Additionally, there are 7 facilitators at the high school who provide curricular leadership without also formally evaluating staff.

resources and professional development to support the high school principal in initiating standards-based instruction and establishing PLCs.

Furthermore, the recent efforts to provide instructional coaches with their own coaching support demonstrated an awareness that investments in the learning of instructional leaders should extend beyond the principals to include other formal and informal leaders (Spillane et al., 2009). Similarly, principals, all of whom identified themselves as instructional leaders, described efforts to motivate and support positive changes in teaching and learning by working in "partnership" with coaches and teachers in their schools. In these efforts, they distributed leadership through both formal (coaches) and informal (peer-peer learning) ways. In addition, principals structured PLCs, data team meetings and collaboration time to support formal OTL, while recognizing how conversations and interactions during these forums created opportunities for incidental learning to occur during social interactions throughout the school day. Furthermore, principals described explicit attempts to differentiate support for their teachers (Knapp et al., 2010), including how they negotiated pacing and access to necessary supports when setting expectations. Lastly, similar to Anrig (2015), who found trust and time as essential for developing the levels of deep collaboration between administrators and teachers that led to significant improvements in low-income districts, leaders in Wyoma identified trust and time as critical to supporting and building their staff's capacity.

Nevertheless, despite clear attempts to "lead the learning" (Honig, 2012), our data suggests some leaders at the elementary level attempted to improve achievement scores by narrowing the curriculum. In these schools, social studies and science were neglected

to provide opportunities for longer instructional blocks in literacy and mathematics. Similarly, some leaders focused on improving test scores of the "bubble students" (Booher-Jennings, 2005), who were on the border of being proficient on the state exam, and focused instruction on explicit test preparation strategies).

While these types of test gain strategies are commonly used by schools with varying achievement levels and different types of subgroup failures (Weinbaum, et al., 2012), there are costs associated with relying primarily on this strategy. A focus on test gain without improving opportunities to learn (OTL) can create an illusion of improvement (Pullin & Haertel, 2008). In these circumstances, for example, instruction typically does not focus on developing student's critical thinking skills. Instead, instruction focuses on developing students' test taking skills and skills that cannot be generalized beyond the test or the academic setting (Jacob, 2005). An emphasis on test gain strategies can also lead to over-classification of students as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and special needs, thereby inadvertently reinforcing educational inequity and further marginalizing underperforming students (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Dentith, et al., 2013).

Leaders implemented evidence based decision-making practices. Evidence-based decision-making was infused throughout almost all leaders' efforts to improve achievement and equity. Multiple forms of data, including surveys, observational data, assessment scores and evaluation trends were used to make systemic change imperative (Wright & Harris, 2010); set direction, prioritize improvement and strategically allocate resources (O'Dogherty & Ovando, 2010). Survey and observational data were also used to understand and shape beliefs and culture.

A synthesis of our data suggests the district was in the beginning phases of effectively using evidence to inform educational practice in a way that leads to improved achievement For example, central office personnel, principals and coaches appeared to value evidence and were attempting to use data to inform decisions about instruction Furthermore, leaders allotted time for staff to collaboratively review multiple measures of achievement data on an ongoing basis and attempted to focus collaborative conversations on understanding data These moves reflect efforts to foster the types of meaningful conversations that Wayman et al. (2012) suggest can lead to common understandings about teaching, learning and data; an important aspect of organizational improvement. However, while use of data was apparent throughout the district, clarity surrounding buy-in, effectiveness and consistency of use among leaders was unclear (Finnegan, et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, while findings suggest leaders had a common preliminary understanding of how data can inform instructional practices that lead to improved student achievement scores, there did not appear to be a common understanding of the potential of data to also inform the opportunities students were given to learn (Pullin & Haertel, 2008; Wayman et al. 2012). In this respect, a strict focus on achievement-related data at the classroom level appeared to eclipse other types of educational data that could be used to detect potential learning inequities. For example, leaders did not appear to be examining discipline, attainment, or advanced placement data for proportionality across subgroups, or for the prevalence of "opportunity gaps" which can lead to underachievement.

Leaders promoted equity through responsiveness. Education is often referred to as the Great Equalizer (Scutari, 2008) and many scholars suggest that public school districts can improve achievement by attending to equity (Hewson et al., 2006; McIntyre, 2016; Rorrer et. al, 2008; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012; Turner, 2014). Our data found that leaders were attempting to attend to equity by owning past inequities relative to the larger student subgroups, and by making efforts to correct past inequities by responding to the needs of individual students.

Leaders acknowledged past inequities by explicitly identifying and owning that achievement disparities did exist between SWDs, ELLs, and economically-challenged students and their white and economically advantaged peers In their attempts to correct past inequities, leaders focused on providing opportunities and empowering both administrators and teachers to apply potential solutions (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010; Turner, 2014), which they did by promoting both high expectations and a student-centered learning environment. For example, the district invested in instructional and emotional support systems (OECD, 2012) by strategically designating instructional coaches, equity coordinators and adjustment counselors for every building, over time. In addition, the district invested in research-based instructional programs at the elementary level, such as the responsive classroom and a research-based literacy program based on the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. Lastly, in an attempt to respond to students' individualized needs, the district employed a multi-faceted approach to professional development in ways that were equity oriented (i.e. co-teaching, responsive classroom, data-driven instructional interventions).

Many scholars of social justice leadership (Capper & Young, 2014; Orosco & Klinger, 2010; Scanlan, 2013) caution that leaders must be mindful of important factors such as inclusion and integration when attempting to narrow the achievement gap. For example, on one hand, RTI models provide "interventions" designed to support struggling learners, and they can prevent the over-identification of students for special education (Capper and Young, 2014). On the other hand, RTI can often remove students from general education classes, which has been found to increase segregation, particularly along race and class lines (Orosco & Klinger, 2010). Similarly, counselors are an important resource for students, but without the proper understanding of inclusion, leaders can unknowingly reinforce exclusion and restrict OTL for students if they must miss class time in order to access counseling services.

Additionally, in their efforts to be responsive, leaders described attempts to create socially just learning communities (Theoharis, 2007; Wright & Harris, 2010). For example, adjustment counselors' efforts to ensure students had warm coats and turkey to eat during Thanksgiving reflected an understanding of the importance of attending to the needs of the whole child (McIntyre, 2016). These kinds of efforts were consistent with those made by certain social justice leaders when attempting to "strengthen school culture and community" in Theoharis' (2007) study on social justice leadership.

Although leaders were attempting to implement socially-just practices that were responsive to the needs of students, leaders did not appear to be promoting cultural proficiency throughout the district, which Wright and Harris (2010) found to be a key strategy used in districts that reduced the achievement gap. Leaders appeared to understand language and special education needs and the impact of poverty but had not

appeared to acknowledge or unpack how race and ethnicity impacted achievement. There also did not appear to be a complex level of understanding of the historical struggles pertaining to race, ethnicity and culture that might inhibit students' opportunity to learn. For example, when describing their efforts to improve learning for ELL students, one of the larger student subgroups, there was no clear acknowledgement of how cultural and ethnic factors that are tied to language differences affected children. The next section will discuss how leaders enacted the four essential roles as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008) during their efforts to improve achievement and equity.

Leaders Enacted Rorrer et al.'s (2008) Four Essential Roles to varying Degrees

While exploring district leaders' efforts to improve achievement, we explored in-depth the degree to which the actions of a district leadership team reflected an enactment of the four essential roles for district leaders in educational reform as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008). Our data confirms Rorrer et al.'s assertion: district leaders in Wyoma were enacting these roles, albeit to varying degrees (see Table 4.1), in their effort to improve achievement and advance equity across the district. At the same time, data also suggests leaders did not have a common definition or understanding of these roles, nor did they have a common understanding of what implementation of these roles should look like. Similarly, enactment of these roles varied in degree, according to position and setting. Two possible explanations for these findings are the fact that the district's improvement process initially began at the school level (the level 3 school) and that here has been turnover in leadership positions over the past several years. The following expands on these findings by describing how the individual roles were enacted.

Table 4.1

How District Leaders' enacted the four roles as conceived by Rorrer, et al., (2008)

Individual Study	Role	Key Findings
Lawson, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Generating Will	Used transformational leadership and distributed leadership to build and sustain will; used resources, inducements and data to reinforce will.
Cushing, 2016	Instructional Leadership: Building Capacity	Used observation, ongoing review of data, supervision and evaluation system to monitor instruction and efforts to improve instruction; procured fiscal and human resources to deploy an instructional coaching model.
McLaughlin, 2016	Reorienting the Organization: District Culture	Made efforts to decipher their organizational culture; us subgroups dynamics to influence culture change; empowered early adopters of the desired change.
Botelho, 2016	Establishing Policy Coherence: Mediating Policy	Response to policies was not proactive or deliberate; crafted policy by attempting to understand policy requirements and flexibility for implementing; reflected on the degree to which policy reinforced and/or conflicted with district goals and needs. Mediated policy by bridging and buffering implementation to serve local interests.
McIntyre, 2016	Maintaining a Focus on Equity	Owned past inequities and established vision and plan for correcting past inequities; allocated resources by adding positions that support "the whole child" by investing in positions, professional learning and curriculum that supports equity-oriented practice.

Providing instructional leadership. As described in the previous section, Rorrer et al. (2008) identified providing instructional leadership as the first role in a district's efforts to reform. This study confirmed that all leaders engaged in the "proactive

administrative behavior" of providing instructional leadership by generating will and building capacity in ways that were supported by research (Daresh, 1991; Firestone, 1989; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The two sub-roles of Instructional Leadership, Generating Will and Building Capacity, were examined independently.

Generating Will. Conclusions drawn from Lawson's (2016) inquiry were consistent with Rorrer et al.'s (2008) findings on two levels. First, the role of generating will was an "element" of leaders' efforts to provide instructional leadership. The second finding builds off of their assertion that the type of will necessary to initiate or sustain improvement, "does not arise automatically nor simply in response to external environments" (p. 315). The study concluded that leaders attempted to intrinsically motivate staff by acting as transformational leaders and distributing leadership in many ways that connected with an individual's values, beliefs and desires. Furthermore, when enacting these leadership constructs, leaders sought to use extrinsic motivators (praise and recognition, data to show growth, and resources such as time and professional learning opportunities) in ways that promoted individual's feelings of competence and sense of self-determination, which are the factors most strongly associated with employee engagement and the high levels of commitment required to realize sustainable improvements (Deci & Ryan, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

Furthermore, leaders enacted this role while contending with economic, political, and cultural forces that played out differently depending on position (superintendent versus coach; new leader v. long term leader) and context (elementary or. high school). In this respect, it is not surprising that although leaders utilized the same leadership constructs, many leaders employed them in different ways. For example, some leaders

used transformational strategies that focused on shaping beliefs by reviewing data, where others concentrated on building trusting relationships. Despite these types of differences, all attempts to generate will reflected a strong commitment to improving teaching and learning (Daresh, 1991) by attempting to intrinsically motivate stakeholders to engage in the work of improving achievement and equity.

Building capacity. Rorrer et al. (2008) illustrated the fundamental importance of building capacity to maintain reform efforts as new challenges arise. Cushing (2016) explored district leaders' specific actions to build capacity as well as how district leaders prioritized capacity-building actions to improve student achievement.

According to Rorrer et al. (2008), there are three main strategies that proactive district leaders use to build capacity: (a) using communication, planning, and collaboration to coordinate and align constituent's work; (b) monitoring teacher and leader goals, classroom instruction, and efforts to improve instruction through transparent use of available data for accountability; and (c) procuring the necessary resources focused on improving instruction.

In regard to how district leaders are building capacity to improve achievement and advance equity district-wide, Cushing (2016) found that district leaders were primarily consistent with the last two of the three strategies enumerated by Rorrer et al (2008). First, school and district leaders observed instruction while checking to see that efforts to improve instruction were being implemented by teachers. They were also effectively using the new supervision and evaluation system as part of this monitoring. Second, district leaders procured the fiscal and human resources to deploy an instructional coaching model across the district. They recognized that past professional development

was largely ineffective and worked to rectify that reality. Coaches modeled lessons for teachers, monitored progress of instructional changes, and provided resources for teachers.

Despite this, implementation variations surfaced relative to the communication and collaboration necessary to align the work. For example, leaders varied in how they used coaches. Complicating this were teaching duties that had been added to coaches' responsibilities. Some leaders explicitly stated that the district was undertaking too many initiatives without clear communication or an understanding of what actions were effective. A lack of communication and alignment between district leaders resulted in fragmentation and a lack of clear vision for capacity-building efforts. In conclusion, while Wyoma district leaders were found to be building capacity in ways that were largely consistent with Rorrer et al (2008), many of their efforts were in the beginning stages and required monitoring.

Reorienting the organization: district culture. Rorrer et al. (2008) argue that two sub-roles exist beneath the role of reorienting the organization: refining and aligning organizational structures and processes and changing the district culture. McLaughlin (2016) explored the latter. That exploration discovered a need for a clearer conceptualization of culture shaping within Rorrer et al.'s framework, a push by Wyoma's district leaders to change their culture, and disconnectedness in their approaches.

In their brief discussion of the shaping of district culture, Rorrer et al. makes three main points: (a) culture is made up of norms, expectations, and values; (b) culture that supports reform is important for districts to create; (c) normative expectations are

necessary to promote reform. This study attempted to add structure and depth to Rorrer et al.'s framework.

Many Wyoma leaders expressed the importance of beliefs in impacting positive change for students. After applying a conceptual framework based on Schein (2010) to exploring the culture shaping efforts of district leaders, McLaughlin (2016) confirmed that Wyoma leaders were working to shape their culture to help improve both achievement and equity. Attempts to shape culture included: making efforts to decipher their organizational culture, using subgroup dynamics to influence culture change, and empowering early adopters of the desired change.

While efforts were being made by the district to create these positive cultural shifts, the type of tactics utilized generally varied between leaders. There was no singular, or even primary, approach to shifting the district's culture. Based on their own unique experiences and training, individual leaders implemented different methods. In addition to not having a common approach, interview data indicated that these leaders also did not have a common framework or language to think about or discuss culture shaping.

While exploring the role of reorienting culture, this study discovered two notable findings about leaders efforts to shape district culture. First, district leaders believed in the need to shape their culture. Second, their efforts to shape culture demonstrated a disjointed, inconsistent approach. These leaders met Rorrer et al.'s expectations of working to create a culture supportive of improvement. They also had been trying to develop norms and values that support change (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In order to assess the level to which that is occurring, future researchers will also need to apply their own

conceptual frameworks due to the the limited description of district culture provided in Rorrer et al.'s study.

Establishing policy coherence. Establishing policy coherence emerged as a third essential dimension. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), district leaders are critical to establishing policy coherence. This role has two subcomponents: mediating federal, state, and local policy; and aligning resources with district needs. In doing so, district leaders take on a "pro-active policy making stance" (Spillane, 1996, p. 65) adapting state and federal policies to serve local goals and needs and allocating resources in a strategic fashion.

With respect to how district leaders were attempting to establish policy coherence, Botelho (2016) found that district leaders were clearly working to navigate federal and state policies in a manner that was somewhat consistent with the role described by Rorrer et al. At times, they explicitly considered their crafting policy coherence role and took on this role fully. In doing so, they discussed how they worked to understand what a particular policy required and how much flexibility existed in implementation. They then explicitly reflected upon the degree to which the policy reinforced and, or conflicted with the goals and needs of the district. Finally, leaders mediated the policy by implementing it in a manner that best met those local needs (Honig & Hatch, 2004). This part of the process involved bridging or buffering policies to serve local interests.

However, this role of establishing policy coherence was enacted inconsistently. Most leaders did not seem to craft coherence in a proactive and deliberate manner. This was especially true of building leaders who typically failed to be able to speak explicitly of this role. Others employed bridging and buffering strategies but did not seem to be

able to reflect clearly upon the reasons for doing so. Additionally, building leaders seemed inclined to bridge, and not buffer, policies thus making it difficult for them to protect schools, teachers and students from negative unintended consequences that might result from some policies. Regardless of how individual leaders enacted the role, a clear and consistent understanding of the role of establishing coherence did not appear to exist.

Maintaining an equity focus. According to Rorrer et al. a focus on equity is a "pivot point for reform" (p. 329). In exploring this role, McIntyre (2016) sought to understand the ways in which leaders enacted the two subcomponents, which includes owning past inequities and foregrounding equity for other leaders. This study found that district leaders in Wyoma enacted each subcomponent to varying degrees. How they went about enacting each subcomponent is described previously in greater detail. In general, leaders owned past inequities by making equity an explicit value in their reform agenda (strategic plan), which laid the "foundation on which members of the school community construct common ground and the school culture" (Ancess & Ort, 1999, p.3).

Consistent with Rorrer et al.'s assertion that successful districts operationalize an equity plan that fosters the belief that all students can learn, leaders foregrounded equity by employing a calculated process for achieving equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students. Specifically, the leaders process for foregrounding equity involved acknowledging their limitations in teaching to many of the diverse populations and attempts to address prior inequities through collaboration and partnerships.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of our findings and current research on systemic reform, the following section provides recommendations for practice that can be used to guide the future efforts

of district leaders seeking to improve achievement and equity system-wide. In this section we discuss how district leaders can fulfill the following recommendations for practice: make equity and explicit and defining collective value; focus instructional leadership efforts on improving educational outcomes; become "data-informed;" and last, but not least, use Rorrer et al.'s (2008) theoretical framework to guide systemic reform efforts.

Make Equity an Explicit and Defining Collective Value

Rorrer et al. (2008) contend that districts that successfully improve achievement and equity do so by demonstrating a "value commitment" that involves making equity a "defining, explicit value, and a desired outcome" (p.334). The following sections discuss how leaders can make equity a defining value by developing their understanding of equity and by foregrounding equity.

Develop an understanding of equity. While acknowledging past inequities and making allowances for correction are important steps in the improvement process (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2010), it will serve district leaders well to make equity an explicit and defining collective value in the district. First and foremost, leaders must understand that there is a relationship between achievement and educational equity (Brown, 2004). Educational equity involves the distribution of educational resources towards learning opportunities that support optimal achievement outcomes for all students (Kahle,1998; Noguera, 2007), where inequity, creates opportunity gaps and leads to low levels of achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The works of Kahle (1998) and Noguera et al. (2012) can deepen leaders' understanding of how inequitable educational practices perpetuate achievement disparities. Capper and Young (2014) can further deepen leaders

understanding of not only what inclusion/integration means, but also the importance of making this understanding the "central, visible, unambiguous anchoring feature of all . . . practices" (Capper & Young, 2014, p.162).

Second, leaders' understanding of achievement disparities must not be limited to the context of education. Leaders must be mindful of the fact that school systems do not exist in isolation from the community. Therefore, the community's social and economic capacity must also be understood and potential linkages between the school and community that aim to build the capacity of both should be explored (Datnow, et al. 2005). Leaders must also understand the broader context, including but not limited to, the history of inequity and factors such as the economic and social capacity within a community that can perpetuate inequity (Datnow et al., 2005; Johnson, 2007). Furthermore, leaders understanding should include the impact of inequity on educational attainment, social and occupational mobility, and our nation's position in the global economy (Darling- Hammond, 2010; NRC, 1997). By understanding the factors and forces that contribute to inequity, leaders will be better equipped to foreground equity as a defining value.

Foreground equity. One way to begin foregrounding is to determine if leaders are inadvertently promoting inequitable practices by evaluating how learning opportunities are distributed among students across the district. Equity audits are one way to assess for both opportunity and outcome gaps (Hehir, 2012; Skrla, et al., 2011). Equity audits are used to examine the extent to which access to quality teachers and enrollment in honors classes, discipline rates, dropout rates, college acceptance rates, and representation in special education is proportionately represented by different groups of

students (Noguera, et al., 2012; Skrla et al., 2011). Results of the equity audit should inform a plan for instituting equitable practices and close existing opportunity gaps.

Professional learning opportunities for leaders (Brown, 2003; Johnson, 2007) that focus on culturally-responsive instructional leadership will develop leaders' ability to understand their role and responsibility when it comes to supporting equity. For example, training in culturally proficient leadership can enable leaders to gain insight into how individual biases and often-unconscious "blind-spots" reinforce leadership practices that reinforce inequity. At the same time, training in social justice leadership can increase leaders' knowledge and awareness of the history and traditions of a diverse student body (Theoharis, 2007). By developing the ability to practice culturally-responsive instructional leadership, district leaders will be able to recognize their own critical consciousness, biases, assumptions and privileges, and understand how they impact the learning environment. As a result, leaders will increase their ability to proactively develop policies and practices that support equitable learning opportunities, and pedagogy and community based partnerships that are culturally responsive (Johnson, 2007).

Focus Instructional Leadership Efforts on Improving Educational Outcomes

District leaders play an important role in improving achievement and equity across the system (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Spillane & Thompson, 1997) and are most likely to support student learning by providing instructional leadership (Honig, 2007; 2012). Thus, it will serve leaders well to focus their attention on improving teaching and learning in ways that leads not only to improved achievement scores, but also to improved educational *outcomes* (Datnow, et al. 2005). Knapp et al.'s (2010)

study, *Leadership for Learning Improvement*, can assist leaders in positively affecting student outcomes by providing guidance on how to (1) invest in staffing and other resources that support equitable learning improvements, (2) develop and exercise distributed instructional leadership within the school, and (3) and transform central office work practices and the district-school relationship in order to develop and sustain instructional leadership capacity. Honig (2012) and Burch & Spillane (2004) provide further guidance by illustrating how leaders can sustain instructional leadership capacity by acting as brokers of information and boundary spanners.

Support and develop principals' capacities to provide instructional leadership. The principal's capacity to provide instructional leadership is another critical aspect of district leaders work to support student learning (Honig, 2010). Findings from this study noted that all principals identified themselves as instructional leaders and viewed the work of improving both teachers' capacity and student learning as a priority. District leaders attempting to bring systemic improvements to scale should nurture this mindset in principals. Additionally, principals (and all formal and informal leaders) should be provided with ongoing job-embedded professional supports and OTL that strengthen their capacity to provide instructional leadership. Of particular importance is the ability of principals to effectively examine evidence that reflects the "quality of teaching" and how to use that evidence to support teachers in improving how they teach (Leithwood, et al., 2004).

Provide high quality opportunities for ongoing professional learning across all levels of the system. Formal opportunities to learn through workshops and courses play an important role in supporting improvement. However, reform efforts are more

likely to achieve scale if professional learning opportunities: are closely connected to the content of classroom practice; are sustained over time; and involve modeling, mentoring and coaching (Datnow, et al. 2005). Thus, it will serve leaders well to focus efforts on providing both leaders and teachers opportunities to learn "during and from" the daily work (Bryk, Camburn & Louis, 1999; Spillane, et al., 2009). Instructional coaching models and the collaboration structures implemented in Wyoma public school district are examples of ongoing, job-embedded OTL, which relied on social interactions for the transfer of information.

The transfer of information through social interactions is essential to learning and knowledge development (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). Therefore, it will benefit district leaders to be mindful of the power of conversation when planning to make large-scale changes in practice (Datnow, et al. 2005. The casual and informal conversations that occur throughout the workday and that result from accidental encounters among and across stakeholders have a tremendous influence on both the success and failure of reform (Datnow et al. 2005; Scanlan, 2013).

Although this study did not focus on sociocultural learning perspectives (Gee, 2008), an understanding of the theory can aid leaders in creating the conditions that will enable social processes to serve as a valuable tool for professional learning and for garnering the commitment needed for improvement to occur. Sociocultural learning theory underscores that actions and interactions between and among individuals and their environment are fundamental to learning and knowledge. Many scholars of this theory view schools as "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) comprised of groups who share a common practice and learn how to pursue this purpose "with and from" each

other (Scanlan, 2013). PLCs, vertical teams, and data review teams are also examples of communities of practice that can provoke new ideas and the rethinking of old mindsets (Mezirow, 2000); they can further be used to promote socially just learning communities (see Scanlan, 2013). Additionally, communities of practice that occur across grade levels and settings create opportunities for boundary spanning, which can minimize conformity and groupthink (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Lastly, communities of practice can also foster trusting professional relationships and the kinds of "relational linkages" that Datnow et al. (2005) posit are essential to reform. The works of Wenger (1998), Gee (2008), Knapp (2008) and Scanlan (2013) can provide a lens for understanding sociocultural perspectives of learning and inform practices that promote continuous professional learning afforded by the social processes that occur within and between communities.

  Become "data-informed." When planning for data use, leaders must not only develop the capacity to use data, they must be able to use it wisely and make meaningful connections with data (Wayman et al., 2012) in ways that support both achievement and equity. Beyond developing their own capacity to use data effectively, leaders must know how to build the district's capacity. Therefore, leaders should be informed, not driven by data. Capacity building efforts to become data-informed should be developed for both leaders and teachers. According to Wayman et al. (2012), three important steps to cultivate a data-informed district are: (1) developing shared district-wide understandings of the continuous process of data analysis as opposed to quick outcomes; (2) providing a content-focused collaborative environment for job-embedded professional learning opportunities, similar to the Wyoma Public School District data team model; and (3)

leveraging computer systems that are easily accessed and supported district-wide that

support rather than overwhelm collegiality and professional community.

Leaders should, furthermore, develop data-related district policies to build

capacity for data use (Wayman, et al., 2012). Specifically, leaders should develop

policies that: (1) address context and how data is used; (2) foster positive attitudes toward

data by mitigating structural barriers, (3) mandate that principals develop data strategies

and act (e.g. computer data systems professional development and collaboration time);

and (4) seamlessly integrate data systems for educators to improve rather than impede

instructional outcomes with minimal technical skill. Using the aforementioned actionable

steps, district leaders can implement improvement strategies for both achievement and

equity by being data-informed.

Use Rorrer et al's (2008) Theoretical Framework to Guide Systemic Reform Efforts

Rorrer et al.'s framework regarding the four critical dimensions of leadership

provides not only a promising theoretical framework for future studies (Leithwood,

2010), but also a propitious guide for the practice of district leaders who are working to

improve achievement and equity system-wide. The team found that district leaders in

Wyoma were enacting all four roles, to varying degrees, in ways that were consistent

with Rorrer et al.'s theory. However, in Wyoma and districts throughout the nation

involved in the complex and challenging work of systemic reform, enacting the roles in a

more informed, proactive and deliberate manner can have tremendous value.

For this reason, leadership teams should be introduced to Rorrer et al.'s (2008)

framework in an explicit and constructive manner. Because this framework is not a

prescriptive process, when preparing for reform, leaders should think about the respective

context in which they will be implementing the four roles and how to implement the framework accordingly. Leaders should also develop a common definition of each role. A common understanding of both the district context and the four roles can aid leaders in determining what implementation should look and what strategies could be used to successfully implement each role. Furthermore, given that the composition of all leadership teams will inevitably change over time, it will serve leaders well to incorporate strategies for orienting new leaders (formal and informal) to Rorrer et al.'s framework into respective improvement plans. In taking these steps, the hope is that leaders would come to deeply understand the four roles so they could proactively enact them and continuously monitor the application of each of the roles in a systematic way while reflecting upon their progress towards improving achievement and equity in the district.

This type of research-based, multi-dimensional leadership approach would provide a unified practical framework for reform that all central office and building leaders could share. At the same time, it provides the necessary flexibility for leaders to focus more directly on certain roles and subsequent relevant goals and initiatives based upon the current context of the district. The individual studies associated with this research project can provide specific guidance on how district leaders can effectively enact each of the four roles in service to improvements in achievement and equity system-wide.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The heavy reliance on interview data and the lack of existing case study research using the full model created potential weaknesses in the study's reliability and transferability. While this study provides detailed insight into the perceptions of leaders

in the mid-sized district, there are inherent limitations to the transferability of its conclusions. The core of this study's data is composed of self-reported interviews gathered over the course of several months. While some documents were examined to create context and confirm espoused beliefs and values, the bulk of the data consists of the unverified views of participants. The lack of additional data forms to further triangulate conclusions and lack of longitudinal data limit the extent to which the researcher is able to confirm the actual implementation of the roles addressed in the study.

The second of our challenges was the lack of empirical studies that attempted to test Rorrer et al.'s full theory. The researchers found the theory to be a compelling conceptualization of the complexity of the task of raising student achievement while focusing on equity. On the surface that may to appear to present challenges to the study's transferability; however, this study's intent was not to create a set of universal responses to its research questions. Rather the researchers desire was to begin the process of detailed examinations of bounded cases. At the conclusion of their work, Rorrer et al. called for future research to build a series of case studies to examine the roles that district's play. This study represents one of the building blocks of that comparative process.

Future researchers can overcome these concerns with the benefit of time. First, with additional site time researchers could pair large amounts of observational data with the perceptions of respondents over a longer period of time. Second, with the passage of time, future research teams will likely have produced numerous additional case studies

using the framework. This will give future studies an opportunity to place itself within a growing body of research that will both reinforce and challenge its own findings.

Conclusion

The persistence of the achievement gap continues to pose a significant threat to the overall stability of the United States. As a result, district leaders are faced with tremendous pressure to improve achievement and equity for all students with little to no guidance. Rorrer, et al. (2008) proposed a theory of district leaders as institutional actors that involves the enactment of four essential roles leaders play in reform, however these roles are not well understood.

This qualitative case study explored the degree to which a district leadership team, attempted to enact the four essential roles as conceived by Rorrer et al. (2008), while working to improve achievement and equity. This study's conclusion is that leaders were attempting to (1) Provide Instructional Leadership (2) Reorient the Organization, (3) Establish Policy Coherence, and (4) Maintain an Equity Focus to varying degrees, as conceived by Rorrer et al. Furthermore, findings revealed that district leaders' support of ongoing, job-embedded professional learning and efforts to improve teaching and learning in a data-informed and equity-oriented way were prominent components of their reform work.

Overall, this study suggests that the implementation of the essential roles of Rorrer et al. (2008) can serve as a promising guide for the practice of district leaders who are working to create the complex changes required for improving achievement and equity system-wide. Synchronously, our study serves as a call for additional case study research of districts' efforts using Rorrer et al.'s framework.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Question alignment key

OAQ = Overarching Questions	**RC** = Reshaping Culture
GW = Generating Will	**PC** = Establishing Policy Coherence
BC = Building Capacity	**MEF** = Maintaining an Equity Focus

* Probes in italics

1. Please describe your current role in the district? And how long have you worked here? **(OAQ)**
   a. *What does this work look like day-to-day?*
2. How are you (along with other leaders in the district) working to improve achievement for ALL students in the district?
   a. *What's happening?* And *what is your involvement/role in this work?*
   b. *Are you making efforts to improve outcomes for groups of students that are struggling? What does that look like?*
3. What is the district's vision for teaching and learning?
   a. *How is it communicated? And how do you feel about it?*
4. What strategic goals and initiatives is the district currently pursuing?
5. How did you get (motivate) people to want to do the initiatives/work? **(GW)**
   a. *Was there resistance?*
   b. *How did you respond?*
6. What strategies were most effective in motivating people? Which were least effective? **(**
   a. *For example, ...*
7. How did you keep the initiatives going once started?
   a. *What got in the way?*
   b. *How did you handle it?*
   c. *How did you keep people motivated?*
8. Are there any key people you rely(ied) on to keep the work going?
   a. *Who? Why?*
9. What are you doing to help your staff to improve their practice? **(BC)**
   a. *Encourage experimentation*
   b. *Structured settings/time to discuss teaching and learning*
   c. *Professional development*

10. How did you decide what to do? What was your process for deciding what to focus?
    a. *In terms of structured PD, how do you decide what you do?*
11. Districts are often full of staff who have deeply held beliefs. Tell me about how you go about trying to understand what your staff really believes. **(RC)**
    a. *How did you come to that judgment (about their beliefs)?*
    b. *Do the staff's beliefs aligned with your desired beliefs for the district? How?*
    c. *Do the beliefs your staff speak about truly reflect what they believe? Artifacts*
    d. *Can you give a specific example of a way you approached trying to understand your staff's beliefs? How did it go?*
12. So, can you tell me about a time when you have tried to shape these beliefs?
    a. *Can you give a specific example of a way you approached trying to shape your staff's beliefs? How did it go?*
    b. *Is it possible to shape a district's beliefs?*
    c. *How important is culture-shaping in relation to other leadership tasks?*
13. What federal and state policies/mandates are you most focused on implementing? **(PC)**
14. How do you think these policies reinforce the goals and needs of the district?
15. In what ways do you think these policies conflict with the goals and needs of the district?
16. How do you implement these policies in a way that addresses local goals and needs? What does that look like?
    a. *How have you leveraged these policies to meet local goals?*
    b. *How have you adapted policies to meet local goals?*
    c. *How do you implement policies that conflict with the current needs and goals of the district?*
    d. *If there were no mandates to fulfill, how might the efforts of the district to improve achievement and equity look different?*
17. Currently, who are the students that you are struggling with? Why do you think they are not doing well in school? **(MEF)**
    a. *What makes you say that*
    b. *What are the barriers impeding their academic, social and/or emotional growth?*
    c. *Wha*t *processes structures and/or practices need to be examined in order to remove the barriers?*
18. Are their any students you think might fall through the cracks?
    a. *Who are they? And what makes you say that?*
19. What have leaders done to improve the outcomes for those students?

a. *If you were to change anything to further improve achievement of those students, what would that change look like?*

b. *What changes might the school implement on its own to support those students?*

c. *What would be the nature of district level change necessary to improve outcomes for those students?*