

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL EXPERIENCES WITH  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

by

Leigh Anne Bramlett Sears

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. The theory guiding this study was Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which explains a triadic view of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Reciprocal interactions between factors contribute to self-efficacy beliefs associated with future action to achieve goals such as those in a Title I School Improvement Plan. Triadic reciprocal determinism was defined as cooperative, interdependent components shaping principals' knowledge, skill, and direction to lead changing federal and state mandated school improvement initiatives. This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe their experiences with school improvement? The move from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to new school improvement requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) revealed a qualitative gap in research including principals' voice, especially in different contexts such as high poverty elementary schools. I utilized a descriptive self-efficacy survey, interviews, document analysis, and a focus group to discover common themes. Themes were used to meaningfully organize units of information to fully and accurately describe principal experiences. Principals described elements of strategy, support, and progress monitoring to achieve successful continuous improvement cultures. The results of this study provide insight into principal experiences with school improvement to help facilitate stronger leadership for improvement in light of changing federal and state school improvement mandates.

*Keywords:* Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), principal, school improvement, social learning theory, Title I, triadic reciprocal determinism

## Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this work to my amazing family. My husband, Chuck, is a source of strength and comfort even in the toughest of times. His eternal optimism guided me throughout my studies and continues to guide me throughout life. The two of us can accomplish anything together, and I look forward to supporting him now as he endeavors to complete his dissertation as well. Thank you for allowing me to monopolize the home office!

To my daughters, Maggie and Anna, you often sacrificed “mommy time” and graciously coached me through this process. I hope that I have been a shining example of what hard work and determination can do for you as you move throughout life. The trips to Liberty for intensives were so much more enjoyable with you both there. Lady Boss!

To my beloved parents, you have always valued higher education and promoted it every chance you had. I am proud to say that I am your daughter and that I have successfully attained the highest education possible. You have always stood by me, and without you, I would be nothing.

Finally, my personal relationship with Jesus Christ has kept me and sustained me during the best and worst of times. Many times during this journey, I have often been reminded of God’s plans for my life. I seek to do Your will in all things and look forward to the doors that will open as a result of this degree. “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (John 14:6, New International Version).

## **Acknowledgments**

The completion of this document would not have been possible without the help of numerous people. Thank you first and foremost to my committee. The feedback you submitted provided me with valuable insight and forced deeper reflection. I also appreciate your patience throughout this process. You each have your own full plates, and I am grateful that you took the time to help me. Dr. Claxton, as my committee chair, you gave guidance and support encouraging me to complete each step while congratulating milestones.

To each research participant, I am so appreciative of the time you gave and the thoughtful responses provided. Principals are busy people, and I respect the time and dedication it takes to serve. Without you, this research would not have been possible. To my work family, you coached and critiqued with the best of them, and I value your contribution to the process and patience throughout it

Over 160 pages of transcriptions and over 1,000 pages of school improvement plans were reviewed to complete this research. It took four years to write this dissertation. During this time, I had a daughter graduate from high school and another start ninth grade; a daughter move into her dorm room at college; my family built a new house; multiple babies were born to nieces and nephews; my dad turned 80; and my job responsibilities increased exponentially at home and work. However, through it all, I tried to keep my eye on the prize. The knowledge gained from this experience is irreplaceable, and I am truly humbled by all of the wonderful people God has placed in my life.

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
Dedication.....	4
Acknowledgments.....	5
List of Tables .....	11
List of Figures .....	12
List of Abbreviations .....	13
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	14
Overview.....	14
Background.....	15
Historical Contexts.....	15
Social Contexts .....	17
Theoretical Contexts .....	19
Situation to Self.....	21
Problem Statement .....	22
Purpose Statement.....	23
Significance of the Study .....	24
Research Questions.....	26
Central Research Question.....	26
Sub-Question 1.....	27
Sub-Question 2.....	27
Sub-Question 3.....	28
Definitions.....	28

Summary .....	30
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	31
Overview .....	31
Theoretical Framework .....	31
Related Literature .....	36
NCLB to ESSA .....	37
Greater Autonomy in School Improvement .....	41
State School Improvement Leadership Support .....	44
District School Improvement Leadership Support .....	45
Principal Leadership in School Improvement .....	48
Data-Driven School Improvement Leadership .....	52
Navigating Change .....	56
Pathways for Greater Success .....	61
Summary .....	62
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....	64
Overview .....	64
Design .....	64
Research Questions .....	66
Setting .....	67
Participants .....	68
Procedures .....	72
The Researcher's Role .....	74
Data Collection .....	76

Descriptive Survey.....	77
Interviews.....	78
Document Analysis.....	83
Focus Group.....	84
Data Analysis .....	87
Trustworthiness.....	89
Credibility .....	89
Dependability and Confirmability .....	90
Transferability.....	90
Ethical Considerations .....	91
Summary.....	92
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....	93
Overview.....	93
Participants.....	93
Ann.....	95
Beth.....	96
Chloe.....	98
Debra.....	99
Eve .....	100
Fiona .....	101
Geneva .....	102
Hope.....	104
Isabel.....	105

Jerry.....	107
Kirk .....	108
Luke .....	109
Results.....	111
Theme Development.....	111
Central Research Question.....	137
Sub-Question One.....	139
Sub-Question Two .....	140
Sub-Question Three .....	142
Summary .....	144
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	146
Overview.....	146
Summary of Findings.....	146
Discussion.....	149
Theoretical .....	150
Empirical.....	152
Implications.....	156
Theoretical .....	156
Empirical.....	158
Practical.....	159
Delimitations and Limitations.....	160
Recommendations for Future Research .....	162
Summary .....	163

REFERENCES .....	166
APPENDIX A: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL .....	179
APPENDIX B: E-MAIL INVITATION TO SUPERINTENDENTS .....	180
APPENDIX C: E-MAIL INVITATION TO RECOMMENDED PRINCIPALS .....	181
APPENDIX D: INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPANT CONSENT .....	182
APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	183
APPENDIX F: THANK YOU EMAIL AND FOCUS GROUP INVITATION.....	186
APPENDIX G: DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY .....	187
APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	188
APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS.....	190
APPENDIX J: TITLE I SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN DOCUMENT .....	191
APPENDIX K: TABLE FOR SCHEDULING ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS.....	195
APPENDIX L: VISUAL TIMELINE REFERENCE.....	196
APPENDIX M: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT .....	197

**List of Tables**

Table 1. Study Participants' Demographics.....	70
Table 2. PSES Self-Efficacy Reports.....	71
Table 3. Principal PSES Score Rankings and Experience .....	113
Table 4. Themes and Codes from Significant Statements and Data Sources .....	116
Table 5. Open Codes, Frequency, and Themes .....	117

**List of Figures**

Figure 1. The Foundations of Social Learning Theory .....	32
Figure 2. The Triadic View of Reciprocal Determinism .....	35
Figure 3. Anecdotal Illustration of Study Findings .....	165

### **List of Abbreviations**

College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI)

Comparative Fit Index (CFI)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES)

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA)

School Improvement Plan (SIP)

Transformational Leadership (TL)

Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. In conjunction with social learning views of interaction viewed through processes of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978), a link has been shown to exist between principal self-efficacy, a personal determinant, and greater student success (Seashore-Louis, Wahlstrom, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007; Versland, 2016). Student success in Title I schools has been historically measured by governmental agencies using components of a school improvement plan (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Accountability decisions, in the form of school improvement mandates, are made at the legislative level, and requirements are communicated to districts and then principals (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Principals, however, are still ultimately responsible for implementing requirements and improving their schools (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Yet, interestingly, it is the principals' voice which is often overlooked throughout the legislative decision-making process (Superville, 2016).

Using background information and a description of the researcher's motivation to complete the study, the significance of the study is addressed in the problem and purpose statements, while questions and pertinent definitions are also included. This study attempts to answer the central research question: How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe their experiences with school improvement?

## **Background**

High volumes of quantitative research exist linking high quality principal leadership with increased student achievement (Braun, Gable, & Kite, 2011; Chappelle & Price, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Related qualitative research, though less in number, has also sought to shed light on the relationship between successful principal leadership and increased student outcomes (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2010; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011). However, as Osbourne-Lampkin, Folsom, and Herrington (2015) posit, it is possible that principals have an even larger impact on student outcomes than was previously suggested due to the necessity of principals to adapt to changing school improvement requirements. The move to ESSA and its emphasis on greater local control in regard to school improvement has brought to light the critical importance of this recognized possibility. The current research seeks to add to the body of knowledge and includes the often overlooked principals' voice in relation to experiences leading school improvement efforts (Manna, 2015). The timeliness of research is critical as principals navigate changing school improvement requirements (Osbourne et al., 2015).

## **Historical Contexts**

Beginning in 1965, the United States took its first giant step toward what is now considered a common notion – educational accountability. A civil rights law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson and was meant to ensure equal educational access and opportunity to all students (United States Government, 2016). Almost 37 years later, it was thought that even more emphasis must be placed on educational equity which is why NCLB (2001) was developed. At that time, a greater focus was placed on what was termed the “achievement gap.” Districts and states across the

nation worked to lessen gaps in performance, especially among subgroups such as minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Annual statewide assessments became the norm, and there were rewards for educators agreeing to teach in schools identified as high need. Most educators initially found the goals of NCLB to be favorable because the ultimate goal is for all children to be optimally successful. However, once educators dug deeper and looked ahead to the goals as specified for 2014, 100% pass rates were expected, creating alarm and unrest among educational professionals. Growing numbers of NCLB opponents spoke out against the unrealistic performance targets and the one-size-fits-all government approach to interventions (United States Government, 2016).

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorizing ESEA (United States Government, 2016). Citing that high school graduation rates are at their highest in United States history, ESSA will continue to focus on the importance of preparing students for college and careers. Highlighting the importance of community wrap-around services, in addition to more state and local control over assessments and how they are used, ESSA has been touted to include provisions helping all students and all schools experience greater success (United States Government, 2016). Accountability in the form of actions to influence positive change will be required. While the current legislation briefly describes new requirements and areas of focus, it leaves out exactly how these goals will be accomplished in the schools. President Donald Trump continues to suggest modifications to ESSA promising states even more flexibility and placing even more accountability in the hands of states, districts, and ultimately principals (Bomster, 2017). In this new era of reform, educator input will be instrumental to the process of breathing life into required accountability.

How prepared are school leaders to lead school improvement in the face of required changes? What can be learned from reciprocal interactions between behavioral, environmental, and personal factors during this shift as interactions give context to one's sense of self-efficacy (Airola, Bengtson, Davis, & Peer, 2014)? Conscientious effort and persistence are demonstrated by individuals possessing high levels of self-efficacy and consequently, elevated perceptions of self-efficacy correlate with elevated levels of effort and ultimate success (Bandura, 1977). Highly efficacious people are the kinds of individuals who should be leading schools if greater levels of effort and success are the result.

### **Social Contexts**

Educational accountability, as a social construct, began to emerge globally in the 1960s, gained momentum in the 1980s, re-emerged in 2001 with NCLB, and is center stage once again with the authorization of ESSA. Educational accountability has political and economic ties also, as it is thought that the results of greater accountability achieve alignment of public goals and educational purpose, along with improved student performance and productivity as defined by academic achievement (Leithwood & Earl, 2000). Given the extensive attention to the development of educational accountability systems, Rice (2010) concludes, "In an era of school accountability reform and shared decision making and management in schools, leadership matters" (p. 1).

On-the-job training while performing the day-to-day operations of educating youth is commonplace among educators today, but some principals are more successful than others with leading required school improvement initiatives in the age of accountability (Crum et al., 2010). Nearly 15,000 schools (16% of all public schools and 28% of all Title I schools nationwide) were identified as "in need of improvement" in the United States for school year 2009-10

(United States Government, 2011). Title I schools face particular challenges along with high rates of poverty. To become what is considered a school wide Title I program, at least 40 percent of the student population must be identified as low income. Achieving school wide Title I status includes additional help and resources to increase student success. As such, there are budgets to be created, parent engagement opportunities to plan, research-based interventions to include, and staff to hire so that all resources are aligned to the needs of the school. One of the many methods chosen to ensure transparency and responsible use of Title I finances wisely is the completion of a thorough improvement planning process analyzing data and resources, all while monitoring goal progress and attainment. School plans are required to support funding and provide accountability information to communities and districts. Societal responsibilities in high poverty areas are important to ensure equity of access to quality learning environments (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). In keeping with the spirit of continuous improvement, school improvement plans should not be created in isolation and should have a connection to the real work of schools and communities (Kimball, 2011). The connection to empowering families and communities to ensure shared leadership and collaboration is explicitly stated in Georgia's own school improvement framework, in an attempt to provide quality, comprehensive improvement planning support (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

Principals, especially in Title I schools, are required to spend time preparing school improvement documents to satisfy mandates, but like most accountability-related training, this preparation could be considered mostly learning by doing (Hess & Kelly, 2007). In fact, 96% of principals have self-reported that experience while performing the job or mentoring received from colleagues has been more valuable than principal preparation to assist with successful school improvement (Hess & Kelly, 2007).

School principals are ultimately responsible for creating, implementing, and tracking progress associated with school improvement based on the needs of their schools (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). As principals are primarily learning through experience, it is important to look at factors influencing behavior leading to performance. Studies examining the relationships between principals' years of experience and student outcomes have also shown a positive relationship (Braun et al., 2011; Grissom & Loeb, 2011). However, contrary to what educators have self-reported related to experiential learning, a positive relationship has also been indicated between educator preparation and school improvement (Knoeppel & Rinehart, 2008). Could it be that more prepared leaders are also those who are willing to seek additional opportunities to gain a multitude of behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences? Interestingly, Knoeppel and Rinehart (2008) examined principals who received their certification before, during, and after accountability-related reform and suggest that principal preparation after reform and increased accountability began to directly emphasize the importance of instructional leadership. There is also quantitative research suggesting leadership-related strategies to specifically increase student achievement (Airola et al., 2014; Merki, 2014). However, what is missing and is required to capitalize on the benefits of greater local control is the voice of principals in different contexts who are directly responsible for planning, implementing, and leading school improvement structures associated with changing federal and state mandates (Bouchamma, Basque, & Marcotte, 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley, Anast-May, O'Neal, & Dozier, 2016; Merki, 2014).

### **Theoretical Contexts**

In accordance with social learning views of interaction viewed through processes of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978), behavioral, environmental, and personal factors work

together as “reciprocal determinants” (p. 346). “Within the process of reciprocal determinism lies the opportunity for people to shape their destinies as well as the limits of self-direction” (Bandura, 1978, p. 357). As such, principal self-efficacy, or belief in one’s self, has become very important in light of the preparation related to performance of accountability-related job tasks (Airola et al., 2014; Bouchamma et al., 2016; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Self-efficacy perceptions influence behaviors ultimately leading to performance, and transformative leadership is considered an important component of targeted action to achieve desired goals (Yang, 2014). A move toward greater decentralization of school improvement requirements, as suggested by ESSA, places even greater demands on principals to more independently and effectively lead school improvement (Moller, 2012). Decentralization will also require highly effective leaders who tend to look at complex, changing tasks as challenges versus individuals with low self-efficacy who doubt their own abilities (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy beliefs affect principal leadership related to accountability, and research has uncovered a strong relationship between effective principals and successful schools (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010). Without strong, effective leadership, schools do not function optimally. As related to Bandura’s social learning theory (1977), motivation and self-efficacy go hand-in-hand. McCullers and Bozeman (2010) also found that principals’ self-efficacy beliefs were positively correlated with beliefs in the attainability of federal and state education goals such as those in NCLB. As such, experiences influence principals’ perceptions and impact self-efficacy related to school improvement. For as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) explains, factors affecting perceptions are important for eventually determining behaviors to achieve goals such as those in a school improvement plan. Considering the increased responsibility of principals to positively affect student achievement, it is important that leaders develop high levels of self-efficacy

(Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Research also emphasizes the value of leaders having access to continuous support from professionals with expertise, strategic insight, and interpersonal abilities to assist principals in leading school improvement (Gaffney, Dawson, & Lock, 2012).

### **Situation to Self**

As a former principal serving under NCLB school improvement requirements, I seek to conduct this study exploring the phenomenon of principal experiences with changing school improvement mandates. Having served as a principal of a Title I school under the mandates of NCLB, my motivation for conducting this study is to better understand principal experiences with school improvement during the transition to new accountability requirements and to examine how principal experiences with improvement requirements might be alike or different moving from NCLB to ESSA. As a current district office employee, I am also motivated to understand how my role may help principals more successfully navigate school improvement requirements during changing mandates. The research base contains quantitative studies related to school improvement as might be expected due to the quantitative nature of accountability in general, but what is missing from comprehensive conversation is the qualitative principal voice in relation to school improvement experiences (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014).

The consuming nature of school improvement and the most current changes represented in new federal and state legislation demonstrate that much can change in an instant due to the highly politicized nature of modern education. ESSA is being described as providing more local control to schools in the context of school improvement planning and processes (United States Government, 2016). With this knowledge and as a district leader, I am also motivated to effectively assist in designing support structures which will help principals navigate school

improvement structures more successfully. In connection with any study, there are beliefs and assumptions attached to the researcher. As such, ontological assumptions will be made in an effort to “embrace different realities” while social constructivism, as a paradigm related to background and viewpoint, will be used to shape the study and construct realities based on emerging themes related to principal experiences with school improvement (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Also realizing that I bring personal interpretation in addition to participant interpretation, I recognize that axiological assumptions will be included (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, epistemological assumptions will be made in an effort to “get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Knowledge will be gathered based on the experiences of others. Although leadership demands are high for principals, each leader experiences school improvement differently and perceives experiences uniquely. The essence of reality experienced by principals leading school improvement is what I aspire to accurately describe in this study. I believe that through honesty, humility, growth, and quality leadership development, leaders become wise and seasoned through the Holy Spirit as demonstrated in Proverbs 11-13 (New International Version). These beliefs will guide the way I interact with participants to ensure value and respect as they share experiences associated with school improvement and changing mandates. Principals’ voices will tell their stories.

### **Problem Statement**

Data across the nation continue to suggest that student achievement remains stagnant (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). In an effort to free schools from perceived unrealistic education goals such as those included in the NCLB Act of 2001, Congress passed ESSA in 2015. ESSA has been touted to grant more state and local control to school improvement as related to educational accountability (United States Government, 2016). It has

been repeatedly suggested that one of the most important aspects of school improvement is effective leadership (Day et al., 2016; Demski & Racherbaumer, 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). There is also quantitative research suggesting leadership-related strategies to increase student achievement (Airola et al., 2014; Merki, 2014). However, what is missing and required to capitalize on the benefits of greater local control, is the qualitative voice of principals who are directly responsible for planning, implementing, and leading school improvement structures associated with changing external federal and state mandates (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Gurley et al., 2016). The building blocks of a child's education begin in elementary settings. Qualitative data exploring elementary principal experiences with school improvement gives voice to those who are directly responsible for the day-to-day management and improvement of schools. Insights into the experiences of elementary principals can potentially shape the way improvement processes, expectations, and supports are implemented, streamlining accountability structures. The problem is that the principals' voices describing experiences with school improvement efforts are largely missing in research (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014). The lack of qualitative data is due, in part, to the relative infancy of the mandated accountability shift and the primarily quantitative nature of school improvement and ultimate accountability in the context of assessment. "There are a number of areas in the new law in which implementation could benefit from the principals' voices" (Superville, 2016, p. 14).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability. At this stage in the research, principals' experiences with school improvement

are generally defined as perceptions of knowledge and skill to lead changing federal and state mandated school improvement requirements. Perceptions include behavioral, environmental, and personal factors continuously interacting according to Bandura's reciprocal causation model leading to high or low self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1978). Therefore, the theory guiding this study is social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) as factors affecting self-efficacy perceptions are important determinants of future behaviors to achieve goals such as those in a Title I School Improvement Plan. By capturing the essence of elementary principals' experiences with school improvement through qualitative methods and using the theoretical lens of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, a basis for understanding beliefs in one's self and abilities to lead school improvement will be added to the body of literature on principal leadership and school improvement. Hopefully, potential support structures will be suggested to help facilitate stronger leadership for improvement with changing federal and state mandates and increased accountability. Some might argue that all levels of principal experiences should be studied. However, elementary principals are responsible for building strong foundations for school success as they are working with the building blocks of a child's education. School improvement experiences also impact elementary school principals in greater numbers because there are more elementary schools due to mandated smaller class sizes at beginning levels.

### **Significance of the Study**

Describing elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability will potentially be significant in several ways and to many different stakeholder groups including policymakers, district office personnel, and principals. Policymakers, much like the legislative branch of government of which they are a part, make school improvement rules. District office personnel, like the judicial branch, evaluate

and then communicate the rules often providing accountability for federal and state mandates such as NCLB and ESSA. Principals then, like the executive branch, are ultimately responsible for carrying out school improvement rules and requirements in their respective schools.

Empirically, there is quite a large body of quantitative research related to school leadership and student achievement (Braun et al., 2011; Chappelle & Price, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012) due mostly to the numerical associations with accountability in general. Moreover, principal voices are largely missing limiting practical application (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014; Superville, 2016). More research is needed about school improvement experiences in different qualitative contexts. The evidence base would benefit from study examining experiences for principals serving in multiple settings such as elementary principals in high poverty schools (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). Future research should also include qualitative studies to learn more regarding the day-to-day work involved and competencies required for effective school management and improvement in the age of increased accountability (Bouchamma et al., 2014). Theoretically, it is important to examine principal experiences and their possible connection with methods for increasing self-efficacy (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015). For example, McCullers and Bozeman (2010) found that principals' self-efficacy beliefs were positively correlated with beliefs in the attainability of federal and state education goals. Practical application spotlights the effects of new ESSA requirements on school improvement. The changes in expectations and experiences are largely unstudied. The limited evidence-base would greatly benefit from rigorous study examining principal experiences and behaviors in multiple settings during this transition (Gurley et al., 2016). The underlying goal of school improvement is to "professionalize school processes for student learning and thus to

achieve high school quality” (Merki, 2014, p. 593). Further study on schools with different goals can reveal additional processes and routines leading to greater leadership success with changing demands and expectations associated with school improvement (Tubin, 2015).

### **Research Questions**

This transcendental phenomenological study will seek to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. Guiding this study will be Bandura’s social learning theory (1977). Bandura (2001) suggests that people create experiences based on environments, and that thoughts influence action. Data will be collected by interacting with sitting principals, who have experienced school improvement requirements under NCLB and ESSA, in order to address a central question and sub-questions (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Given the purpose of the study, the following questions will frame the research:

#### **Central Research Question**

How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe their experiences with school improvement? This central question aims at understanding the principal experience with school improvement. Mintrop, MacLellan, and Quintero (2001) analyzed school improvement plan (SIP) designs and described plans as being externally viewed as a “path back to healthy performance” (p. 197). Three SIP designs and 103 plans were coded and analyzed. Similarities included quantitative and qualitative elements, performance-based assessments, growth targets, and recognitions. SIP findings also indicated similarities describing a large number of activities across multiple areas. Goals appeared similar, and philosophies were uniform. To possibly explain these findings, the authors suggested that principals can be so focused on the broad nature of school improvement planning and

accountability that uniqueness, individuality, and voice can be compromised (Mintrop, MacLellan, & Quintero, 2001).

### **Sub-Question 1**

How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe behavioral experiences with school improvement? Behavioral experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect changes in levels of success, changes in productivity, and changes in a variety of self-evaluation methods (Bandura, 1978). Connected with behavioral experiences are state standards and evaluation systems which typically hold principals accountable for developing leadership capacity in others to manage school improvement, but the continued focus of accountability systems is centered on the knowledge and skill vested in the role of the principal (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). In order to succeed with new mandates associated with school improvement, further research is required to examine successes across a diverse range of behavioral experiences to bring in context. Findings in this area generate purposeful thinking about the benefits of reviewing what works when leading school improvement (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016).

### **Sub-Question 2**

How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe environmental experiences with school improvement? Environmental experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect social and physical components (Bandura, 1978). Connected with environmental experiences, few quantitative school improvement studies meet the rigor necessary to recommend application in practice or policy (Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). Application in practice or environment becomes increasingly important in light of the recent legislative shift to ESSA. This question is

aimed at understanding effective and efficient support structures helping to facilitate a seamless shift so that schools can be optimally successful. The role of district leadership, as an intermediary between federal and state mandates and schools, is perhaps more important than ever (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016).

### **Sub-Question 3**

How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe personal experiences with school improvement? Personal experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect emotional and self-efficacy components (Bandura, 1978). Connected with personal experience, evidence links principal self-efficacy and student achievement (Goddard & Salloum, 2011). It is also useful to examine the conditions leading to loss of self-efficacy in principals (Versland, 2013). Leaders who experience diminished self-efficacy tend to set less challenging goals and often do not persevere when faced with difficulties, so it can be inferred that principals who suffer a loss of efficacy will have less success with school improvement (Wahlstrom, Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). States now have more autonomy and individual schools now have more freedom to use professional judgments to lead effective school improvement (Ferguson, 2016).

### **Definitions**

The terms defined below will be significant to the study, are closely related to the topic, and are fully supported by the literature and related theoretical framework.

1. *Accountability* – A concept initiated in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration meant to ensure educational access and opportunity leading to increased assessment (United States Government, 2016).

2. *Agency* - One's ability to act in important and effective ways (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010).
3. *ESSA*- Passed by Congress in 2015, the newest federal mandate governing school improvement emphasizing greater state and local control over assessments (United States Government, 2016).
4. *Institutional Isomorphism* – External demands shape the direction of an organization creating uniformity (Mintrop, McLellan, & Quintero, 2001).
5. *NCLB* – Passed by Congress in 2001, a federal mandate governing school improvement emphasizing equity and accountability leading to goals including 100% pass rates in 2014 which many found unreasonable (United States Government, 2016).
6. *School Improvement Plan* –a data-driven plan specifying goals and actions leading to increased student achievement (Dunaway, Do-Hong, & Szad, 2012).
7. *Social Learning Theory* – Idea that information is gained through social interaction and experience (Bandura, 1977).
8. *Self-Efficacy* – Belief in one’s capability to produce a desired result leading to greater perseverance and long-term success (Bandura, 2001).
9. *Title I* – A label applied to schools with large percentages of students living in poverty as demonstrated by free and reduced lunch applications (Hall, Weiwen, & Albrecht, 2016).
10. *Transformational Leadership* – Behaviors and processes successfully impacting school reform (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015).

11. *Transcendental Phenomenology* – A type of qualitative research identifying a phenomenon and studying it based on the experiences of others. Data are analyzed using significant statements organized into themes and ending with a composite description (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).
12. *Triadic Reciprocal Determinism* – Behavioral, environmental, and personal components working cooperatively to shape knowledge, skill, and direction (Bandura, 1978).

### **Summary**

“Leadership is the exercise of influence” (Nir & Hameiri, 2014, p. 212). A challenge is that principals are often the most important determinant of success with comprehensive school improvement, but often become secondary in the political arena surrounding educational accountability (Superville, 2016). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. In keeping with the premise of reciprocal determinism, behavioral, environmental, and personal factors continuously interact uncovering opportunities for unprecedented success or illuminating perceived boundaries (Bandura, 1978). Self- efficacy beliefs, as personal factors, determine how much effort and persistence people will expend based on self-enhancing or self-hindering thought (Bandura, 2001). Leadership becomes more complex as leaders navigate challenges related to accountability. It is becoming increasingly evident that leadership is contextual, with macro and micro-politics related to systems and schools (Chitpin, 2016). Therefore, it is important to describe experiences with school improvement in different contexts.

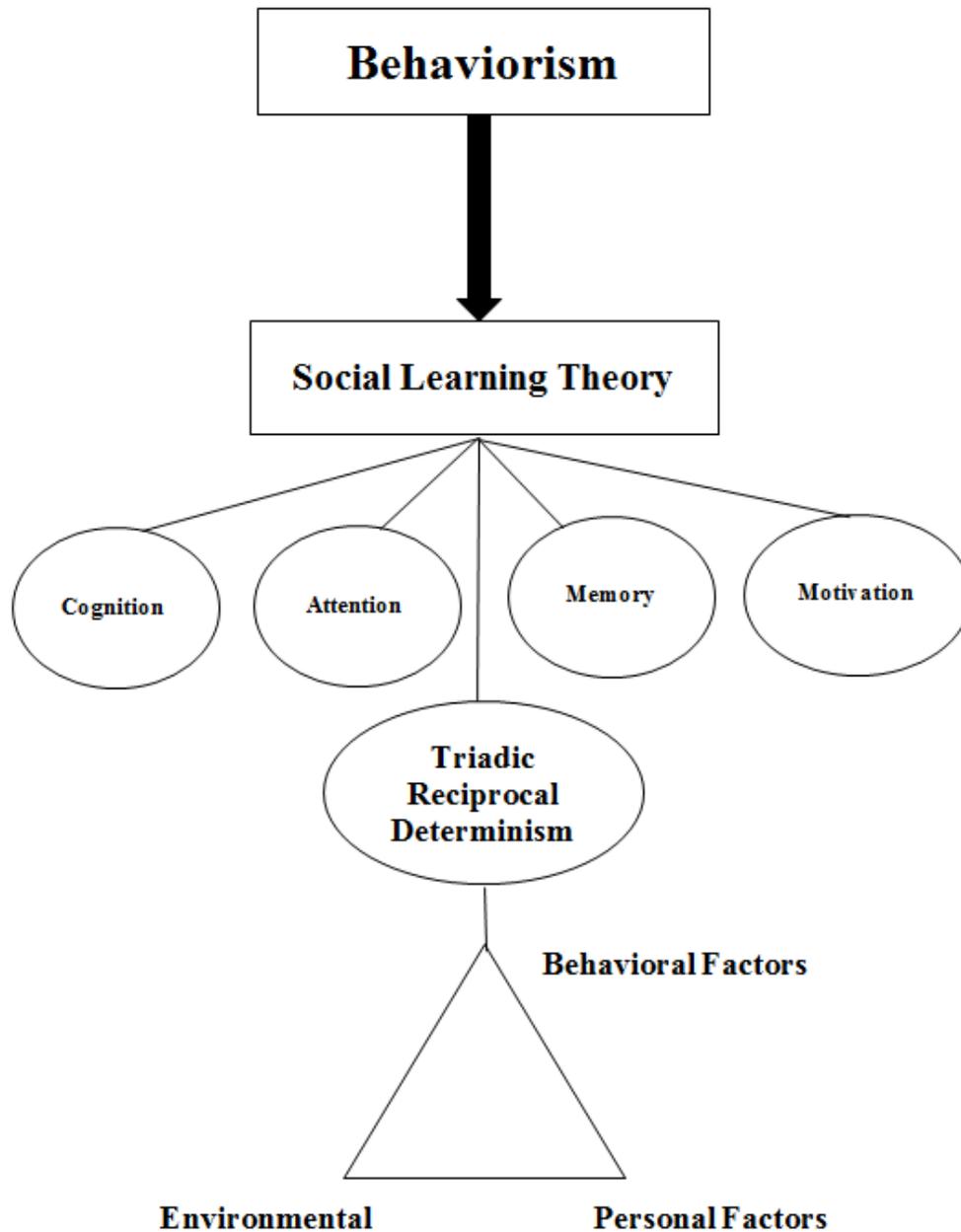
## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This chapter presents Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which explains a triadic framework of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors impacting performance. Principals, as building-level leaders, are ultimately responsible for leading ongoing school improvement processes in their respective schools (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Continuous reciprocal interactions among triadic factors, such as those found in social learning theory, can contribute to agency, one's ability to act in important and effective ways (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010), and also influence self-efficacy, belief in one's capability to produce a desired result leading to greater perseverance and long-term success (Bandura, 2001). Both agency and self-efficacy, as related concepts, are connected with future action to achieve goals such as those in a Title I School Improvement Plan (Bandura, 1978).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Skinner's (1950) behaviorism and the basic philosophy of rewarding and extinguishing behaviors was a precursor to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Originating in the 1970's, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory added to behaviorist theories and included cognitive components in addition to concepts such as attention, memory, and motivation (Bandura, 1977). Believing that learning principles and processes were reflective of underlying factors, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory treated triadic reciprocal determinism as a basic tenet ranging from intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors to the interaction of organizational and societal systems (Siemens, 2005). As such, principals and their leadership for school improvement involve intrapersonal, interpersonal, and interactive organizational processes (see Figure 1) forming a basis for the study (Bandura, 1977).



*Figure 1.* The foundations of social learning theory based on Bandura (1977). Graphic Leigh Sears 2019.

Principal responsibilities have increased since first approval of ESEA in 1965, and the addition of mandated accountability measures has placed more external pressure on building

level principals to improve schools (Airola, Bengston, Davis, & Peer, 2013; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Accountability pressures, and the way pressures are processed and acted upon, create how school improvement requirements are experienced on behalf of the school principal as school improvement leader (Bandura, 1998). Bandura's (2001) social learning theory also proposed that people create experiences based on external environments, and that internal thoughts influence action. Thus, human beings are ultimately agents of their own experiences. The concept of human agency raises the basic question of how people should optimally generate or process activities or experiences in order to achieve goals. Agency also encourages people to adapt in order to create situations that are favorable, or suggests modification of behaviors to successfully enable achievement of desired goals to meet mandated school improvement initiatives (Bandura, 2001). Human agency includes internal processes such as intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection (Bandura, 2001).

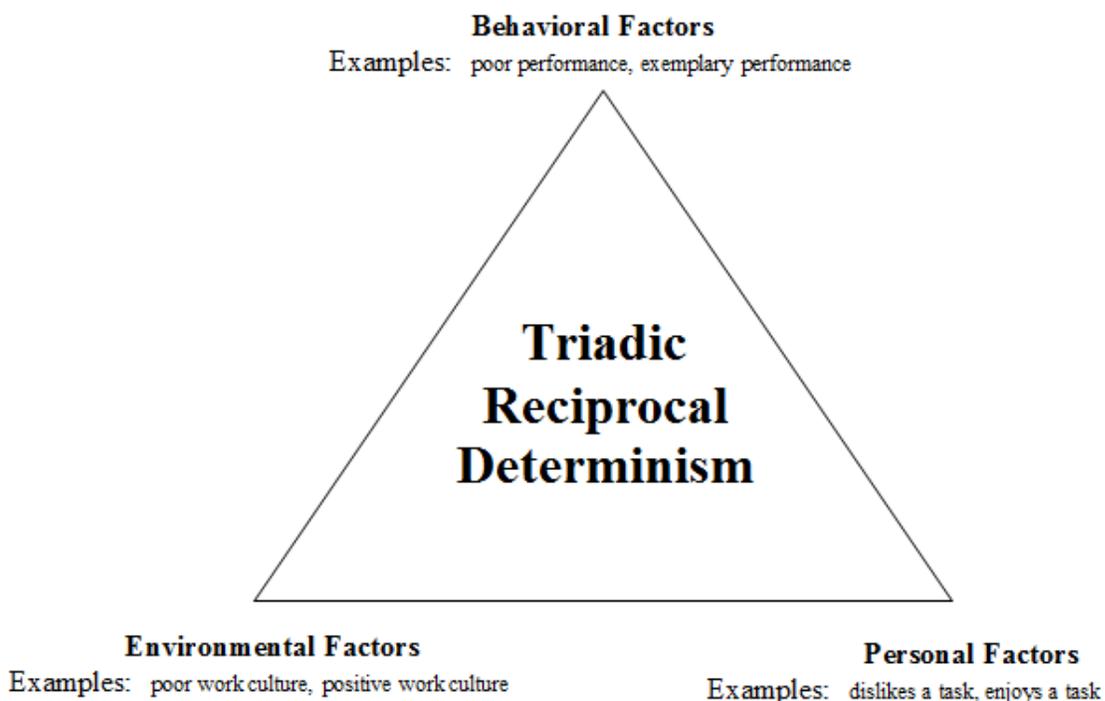
According to Bandura's social learning theory (1977), self-efficacy beliefs then also inform principal leadership related to accountability, and research has uncovered a strong relationship between effective principals and successful schools (Braun et al., 2011; Chappelle & Price, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Without strong, efficacious leadership, schools do not function optimally (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007; Versland, 2016). As related to Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977), motivation and self-efficacy go hand-in-hand. Self-efficacy can be defined "as one's belief in one's own agency, or one's ability to act in ways that are important and effective" (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010, p. 56). McCullers and Bozeman (2010) found that principals' self-efficacy beliefs were positively correlated with beliefs in the attainability of federal and state education goals. As such, experiences influence principals' perceptions and impact sense of

agency and self-efficacy related to school improvement. For as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) explained, factors affecting perceptions are important for eventually determining behaviors to achieve goals, such as those in a school improvement plan.

School leader agency, or action to achieve goals, and school leader self-efficacy, or belief in one's self, have become very important in light of preparation related to accountability-related job tasks (Osbourne-Lampkin et al., 2015). Both agency and self-efficacy, in a more global sense, can be viewed through Bandura's (1978) framework of triadic reciprocal determinism. Triadic reciprocal determinism includes behavioral, environmental, and personal factors influencing efficacy and agency (Airola et al., 2013). Bandura (1978) explained the connection among factors and how behavioral, environmental, and personal factors are indicative of a three-legged stool balancing and affecting each other simultaneously, while interacting in different ways possessing different amounts of influence.

School principals juggle reciprocal determinants as they are ultimately responsible for creating, implementing, and tracking progress associated with school improvement based on the needs of their schools (Osbourne-Lampkin et al., 2015). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) goes on to explain that environmental factors affecting personal perceptions are important for eventually determining behaviors to achieve goals. Experiences then further influence principals' perceptions and affect sense of agency and self-efficacy related to school improvement (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010). Principals are primarily learning through behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences as explained by reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 2001), so it is important to explore factors leading to performance (see Figure 2). Reciprocal determinism includes the opportunity for people to achieve positive results in the

quest of continuous school improvement and the interactions of reciprocal determinants, or uncover limitations in the context of reciprocal determinants (Bandura, 1978).



*Figure 2.* The triadic view of reciprocal determinism based on Bandura (1978). Graphic Leigh Sears 2019.

Considering the increased responsibility of principals to positively affect student achievement, it is important that leaders develop high levels of self-efficacy in the newest age of accountability (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). To develop efficacious behaviors, research emphasizes the value of principals having access to continuous support from professionals with expertise, strategic insight, and interpersonal abilities assisting principals in leading school improvement (Gaffney, Dawson, & Lock, 2012).

Practical application of triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978) spotlights the effects of new ESSA requirements on school improvement leadership. The changes in

expectations, behaviors, and experiences are largely unstudied in this newest age of accountability. The limited evidence-base would greatly benefit from rigorous study examining principal experiences and behaviors in multiple settings during this accountability transition (Gurley et al., 2016). The problem is that the principals' voices describing experiences with school improvement efforts are largely missing in research (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014). The underlying goal of school improvement is to "professionalize school processes for student learning and thus to achieve high school quality" (Merki, 2014, p. 593). Further study on schools with different goals and support systems can reveal additional processes and routines leading to greater leadership success with changing demands and expectations associated with school improvement (Tubin, 2015). More pieces to the puzzle of triadic reciprocal determinism can be discovered and greater balance achieved with the three-legged stool of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors (Bandura, 1978).

### **Related Literature**

A literature review follows building background for study significance as it relates to elementary principal experiences with school improvement following the newest accountability requirements under ESSA. The literature will include (a) NCLB to ESSA, (b) greater autonomy in school improvement, (c) state school improvement leadership support, (d) district school improvement leadership support, (e) principal leadership in school improvement, (f) data-driven school improvement, (g) navigating change, and (h) pathways for greater success. In conclusion, the chapter will clearly articulate the gap in the literature.

## **NCLB to ESSA**

States have much greater autonomy under ESSA to determine exact forms of accountability systems (Ferguson, 2016). Prior to ESSA, NCLB originally placed much tighter demands on exact requirements for predetermined proficiency, going so far as to prescribe a timeline for schools to demonstrate 100% proficiency in reading and mathematics. Individual state school improvement ESSA compliance plans were under construction in states through September 2017, and ESSA encourages local districts, with the help of stakeholders, to decide strategic support structures and improvement requirements, providing greater autonomy but also the possibility of lofty, unexpected challenges (Ferguson, 2016). Going from school improvement requirements which were heavily prescriptive to a more personalized demonstration of progress, Georgia's own "Systems of Continuous Improvement" include five categories which will be associated with leading effective school improvement under ESSA. These categories include (a) instructional systems, (b) professional capacity, (c) learning environment, (d) family and community engagement, and (e) leadership (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Leadership is its own category, as effective leadership, under Georgia's plan, is described as an integral component of the complex school organization for setting direction and ensuring staff competence, all while adhering to mission and vision articulations (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Quality leadership is clearly identified as a priority impacting teaching and learning in every classroom and impacting every student throughout Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). The state's explicitly identified purpose for school improvement is to broaden leadership capacity throughout districts and schools in order to promote more ownership of systemic improvement work (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). All things considered, it is not surprising then that leadership is listed as its own distinct

entity in the plan for Georgia based on the importance placed on leadership roles in accountability (Day et al., 2016; Demski & Racherbaumer, 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). Leadership capacity issues are expected to arise as principals assume more direct responsibility and creativity associated with school improvement planning processes (Ferguson, 2016). As principals are primarily learning through experience, it is important to look at factors influencing behavior leading to performance under ESSA.

For example, like many other systems, the Northeast Georgia school systems considered for this study include some poor, rural communities and schools which have been found to present challenges in terms of sustainable school improvement, even for those systems receiving federal school improvement grants (Scott & McMurrer, 2015). Federal school improvement funds seek to provide opportunities for equitable service to districts with needs and a lack of resources, and principals often rely on additional monetary support to help lead and fund well-intentioned school improvement initiatives. Title directors, individuals at state and district levels ultimately responsible for overseeing a variety of funding sources for high poverty areas, were surveyed in a study by Scott and McMurrer (2015), and response rates impressively represented 92% of states yielding a comprehensive national view of leadership, leadership support, and the relationship to school improvement. Further highlighting the importance of effective leadership and building successful capacity for school improvement in high poverty schools, research results indicated that almost a quarter of Title directors felt that replacement of the principal was essential to sustain positive school improvement (Scott & McMurrer, 2015). School improvement processes involve actions initiated by the principal, and school improvement processes also include behavioral, environmental, and personal processes that are not always overtly evident without intensive qualitative study (Brown et al., 2011; Crum et al., 2010; Sanzo

et al., 2011). It is the triadic reciprocal determinants which deserve more intensive qualitative study among Title I school principals (Bandura, 1977). In order to succeed with new mandates associated with school improvement, further research is required to examine successes across a diverse range of experiences to bring in context.

One of the elements virtually ignored in the last decade of educational accountability was rural communities as evidenced by NCLB's highly qualified status restrictions placed on personnel resources in rural schools (Gagnon, 2016). Greater flexibility in the form of ESSA could possibly free poor, rural systems from unrealistic demands and permit staffing alternatives promoting meaningful progress (Gagnon, 2016). But exactly how confident principals are with unlocking some of the new flexibility associated with ESSA may be influenced by efficacy perceptions, which influences how much effort is expended and how long efforts persist in light of obstacles and challenges associated with accountability (Bandura, 1977). Still, there are positive examples of greater autonomy highlighting the effects of moving from rigidity to more flexibility and describing how to better navigate those processes. In a study of a Clementine Academy, a British school which was granted independence from mandated external school accountability, greater local autonomy in matters related to school improvement were viewed positively and produced desirable effects such as expanded curricula, more post-graduation opportunities, greater team building, and less competition among schools (Keddie, 2014).

But as Keddie (2014) also recognizes, there are new responsibilities associated with greater autonomy relating to how new flexibility is comprehended and enacted, such as what is proposed under ESSA. While state oversight to support school improvement still exists, the primary responsibility for school improvement is seen as the domain of the local school and community (Keddie, 2014). There are similar requirements under Georgia's ESSA plan (2017)

as stakeholder involvement becomes a prerequisite to comprehensive needs assessment planning. This domain shift marks a new era in leadership for school improvement and underscores the importance of reciprocal determinism and the ability to build upon principal strengths or uncover leader limitations facilitating stakeholder engagement (Bandura, 1978).

Again, illustrating that increased accountability is not a uniquely American concept, Brauckmann and Pashiardis (2010) completed a case study among European schools examining tension between internal accountability and external evaluation measures emphasizing control. Researchers found that a balance must be located between internal and external processes in order for increased accountability to result in true building-level, leader-driven, stakeholder-owned improvement (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2010). Findings then support the premise of new ESSA legislation granting greater flexibility to states and local districts to increase student achievement. Fischer (2001) also linked principal self-efficacy and perceived autonomy related to school improvement and coined the term “conditional control” to illustrate that principals are conditioned by environmental factors (Fischer, 2001). Bandura’s (1978) triadic reciprocal determinism recognizes the importance of environmental factors but also behavioral and personal determinants as well. It is the successful balance of factors which produces higher levels of student achievement in the context of school improvement.

Additionally, Senator Lamar Alexander, one of the architects of ESSA, mentioned the future reduced role of the federal government in educational accountability stating that NCLB had shackled previous improvement efforts while ESSA promotes greater independence, creativity, and innovation (Klein, 2016). Some of the newest accountability elements under ESSA mandate that states devise their own plans with ultimate approval from the federal government, including testing opt-out laws permitting state decisions about what should happen

in schools not meeting goals. Some of Georgia's plans for principals to lead school improvement in the newest age of accountability include components such as (1) school climate and culture, (2) distributed leadership, (3) quality instruction, (4) operational management, and (5) innovative assessment measures (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

Though ESSA seems to initially promise what most educators have been advocating for, it may not be easy to implement (Klein, 2016). As schools work to develop continuous school improvement structures, leadership development for principals should be considered as a possible means of increasing sense of efficacy leading to greater agency, and indirectly supporting potential for improved school performance. Professional learning for leadership, as mandated by ESSA, will be required in an effort to develop, retain, and advance successful school leaders. Efficacy has received sparse attention in qualitative literature addressing leadership (Hannah et al., 2008). A link has been shown to exist between principal self-efficacy and student achievement (Goddard & Salloum, 2011). As such, it will be useful to describe factors (behavioral, environmental, and personal) that may lead to a loss or gain in self-efficacy while moving to newer, more autonomous accountability systems (Versland, 2013). Descriptions of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors during this accountability shift will help to potentially identify support structures needed to help facilitate stronger leadership for school improvement during changing mandates.

### **Greater Autonomy in School Improvement**

Accountability systems rely on quality in school improvement planning, and school improvement planning can take on new meaning for schools not meeting perceived or mandated expectations for student performance (Mintrop & McLellan, 2002; Mintrop, McLellan, & Quintero, 2001). Using a collaborative process involving stakeholders, school improvement

planning ultimately breathes life into a conglomeration of comprehensive ideas representing diverse thought processes about what it takes to improve schools. But the school improvement plan itself has not represented complex “layers of lived culture and practice” (Mintrop, MacLellan, & Quintero, 2001, p. 198). More research is recommended analyzing relationships between SIP quality, leader collaboration, culture, and implementation (Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, & Duque, 2015). To capture these complexities, qualitative data representing the principal voice as a leader in these processes and associated products is also required (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Gurley et al., 2016).

Focusing on the school improvement plan document specifically, Mintrop, MacLellan, and Quintero (2001) sought to identify patterns in school improvement plan content by conducting a document analysis using three case studies from California, Kentucky, and Maryland. Hypothesizing that school operations increase when external performance expectations are internalized and when schools and leaders are highly focused and align programs, Mintrop, McLellan, and Quintero (2001) found “institutional isomorphism” among three states (p. 214). Common or institutionalized elements included restatements of external goals rather than personalized internal goals, philosophies with educational buzz words to appeal to external audiences, and action plans consisting of lists of routines and procedures with occasional mentions of educational best practices (Mintrop et al., 2001). To possibly explain common findings, it was suggested that standardization in school improvement requirements under NCLB limited school improvement options and creativity in leadership (Mintrop et al., 2001). In an extension of this study a year later, 46 elementary and middle schools on probation in Maryland also showed patterns of external compliance, some internal management based on external mandates, and greater success among schools with leadership facilitating internalized

development of school improvement goals and processes (Mintrop & McLellan, 2002). With fewer federally-mandated external compliance measures, what will principal experiences with school improvement in the newest age of accountability possibly reveal related to triadic reciprocal determinism and the balance achieved among behavioral, environmental, and personal factors (Bandura, 1978)?

If limitations have somewhat constricted school improvement leadership and innovation, what effect has 15 years of NCLB school improvement mandates had on principal autonomy and potential innovation, and how effective will leaders initially be when given greater autonomy and local control under ESSA? For example, state and federal agencies, as opposed to some previously perceived roles, are encouraged to take a backseat with items such as budgets, staffing, and local policies under ESSA (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). State and federal agencies are also encouraged to promote local decisions in resource allocations under ESSA (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). While yet another example of greater autonomy under ESSA is that state and federal agencies, as opposed to a more authoritarian approach, must assist with general local stakeholder knowledge and comprehension of plans, issues, and partnerships (Weiss & McGuinn, 2016). What state and federal assistance will look like exactly has yet to be determined, but it can generally be inferred that greater promotion of leadership intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection, all components of human agency, will be likely components (Bandura, 2001). It, therefore, becomes increasingly important to hear the principal voice during this transition to more local autonomy and learn from leader experiences during the shift from NCLB school improvement requirements to those under ESSA and state-proposed alignments with requirements (Superville, 2016).

## **State School Improvement Leadership Support**

As research suggests, leaders who experience low self-efficacy tend to set less challenging goals and often give up when confronted with challenges, suggesting that principals with low self-efficacy may ultimately struggle with direction, building capacity, designing organizations, and implementing strategic instructional design (Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Versland, 2014). As such, Weiss and McGuinn (2016) have suggested five areas where states must continue to take prominent roles so that principals are effectively supported during the transition to ESSA in order to provide successful continuous school improvement leadership. These areas include (1) articulating vision, mission, and goals, (2) using state standards and assessments, (3) streamlining systemic accountability, (4) responsible use of state and federal funding, and (5) communicating critical educational issues with stakeholders. Georgia's own "Systems of Continuous Improvement" involve each of the suggested elements (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Effective and efficient support systems are necessary to help facilitate a seamless shift so that systems, leaders, and schools can be optimally successful.

Another poignant example of the need for effective state school improvement leadership support can be seen in Washington State (Yatsko, Lake, Bowen, & Nelson, 2015). Under NCLB, over \$3 billion dollars were allocated nationwide in 2009 to help states turn around the lowest-performing schools in an effort to eliminate the perceived barrier of inferior funding (Yatsko et al., 2015). States competed heavily for money and over a dozen of the funded schools were in the state of Washington. After analyzing the schools in Washington State, study results indicated that the majority of schools examined exhibited limited evidence of substantial transformative change, indicating that money, nor additional external mandates, may be the best answer for continuous improvement (Yatso et al., 2015). In an effort to build more successful

schools and more effective school leaders, it is suggested that the role of state school improvement leadership must shift from mere compliance to collaborative development support to include (1) building partnerships with improvement leaders, (2) assisting with choice of lead collaborators, (3) communicating clear expectations and results, and (4) providing legislative policy support for districts desiring more transparency and flexibility to inspire innovation and effective leadership (Yatso et al., 2015). As such, “It is not enough to work to build planners’ capacity – policy makers must build the right capacity at the right time” (Strunk et al., 2015, p. 300). It is now the time. For without strong, effective leadership, schools do not function optimally. As related to Bandura’s social learning theory (1977), motivation and self-efficacy go hand-in-hand, and effective capacity building increases efficacy perceptions which affect agency, or one’s ability to act in important and effective ways (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010).

### **District School Improvement Leadership Support**

While state leadership support is important, district capacity to assist schools and building level leaders with school improvement in order to reshape teaching and learning is also sometimes a concern (Yatso et al., 2015). Weiner and Woulfin (2017) conducted a related study including inexperienced principals in an attempt to describe some successful interactions between school and district leaders advancing school improvement. In their research, Weiner and Woulfin (2017) defined “controlled autonomy” as “conditions in which principals are expected to make site-based decisions and be accountable to district oversight” (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017, p. 335). This definition depicts the current expected relationship between ESSA school improvement requirements, local education agencies, and schools. Considering responses from first year principals, perceived district level functions were grouped into four categories including (1) operations, (2) instruction, (3) advocacy, and (4) vision and goals (Weiner &

Woulfin, 2017). Findings suggested that more independent approaches to school improvement should allow flexibility for school and district leaders to collaborate while leveraging skills, talents, and expertise (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017). Perceptions of skills, talents, and expertise include behavioral, environmental, and personal factors continuously interacting according to Bandura's reciprocal causation model leading to high or low self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1978). True capitalization on collaborative skill and expertise can produce greater intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection, all recognized elements of human agency, or the ability to act on school improvement processes based on higher perceptions of efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

Perhaps another interesting perspective to consider in the shifting, more autonomous school improvement culture brought about by ESSA is that of district superintendent. As manager of district and school processes, more congruency in expectation associated with ESSA and state mandates is expected, and district leadership has the potential to have a positive impact on student outcomes at the school level (Dunaway, Bird, & Wang, 2013). Using survey-based research from over 200 superintendents in the southeastern United States, school improvement processes were studied, and over two-thirds of superintendents reported using the SIP format in their districts. However, only 17% of participating superintendents believed that SIP goals motivate staff members to increase performance (Dunaway et al., 2013). So if SIP goals do not motivate, how do district and building level leadership unite to produce desired results? Some insight may be provided with Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and attention, memory, and motivation in relation to cognition (Bandura, 1977). By capitalizing on interpersonal and interactive organizational and societal processes, leadership for school improvement can be highly efficacious according to basic social learning theory tenets (Bandura, 1977).

Further attending to the correlational components of attention, memory, motivation, and cognition in Bandura's social learning theory (1977), a mixed-methods study investigated SIP quality and implementation in Los Angeles, California. Findings suggested that district support for leaders should be given at different times, rather than isolated, predictable segments throughout the school year to increase principal motivation (Strunk et al., 2015). Suggested actions and roles for greater district help include (1) supporting school teams leading to productive and specific SIP work, (2) assisting with strategically aligned resources, (3) employing open, honest dialogue, and (4) using alternative accountability procedures related to SIP implementation (Strunk et al., 2015).

Capacity building in the context of state and district support is a term that many use in the context of effective school improvement leadership. Szczesiul (2013), in a year-long study of a district team, researched a capacity-building initiative intended to encourage collaboration, reflection, and improvement in schools. Findings clearly showed that principals looked for district goals to encourage reflection, and contrary to this component, the superintendent wanted to leave decisions about goals to individual school leaders (Szczesiul, 2013). This level of ineffective communication is all too real in many systems. Further supporting the need for clear direction and coherence from district level support, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), also emphasized the importance of true collaboration with principals to set goals clearly defining the work of the system. With effective collaboration, systemic processes and tiered support then become more streamlined and offer timely, individualized leadership support and greater capacity building for leading school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004). These same tiered and timely interventions are often heard in the context of the student. However, just as students become co-collaborators in their own learning and ultimately set goals and monitor

progress, so should leaders. Goal setting, monitoring, and reflection support the triadic view of reciprocal determinants including behavior influenced by personal and social factors (Bandura, 1978).

Relatedly, principals' perceived autonomy support from districts has also been explored (Chang, Leach, & Anderman, 2015). Results indicated that district support is most important for principals with less years of experience, and encouragement and supportive decision-making are required, especially for inexperienced principals (Chang, Leach, & Anderman, 2015).

Autonomy conflicts between district and school leaders have been shown to affect principal job-related motivation (Chang, Leach, & Anderman, 2015), impacting the interaction of organizational and societal systems necessary for triadic reciprocal balance and productivity (Bandura, 1977). Motivation and self-efficacy once again go hand-in hand in Bandura's social learning theory (1977).

### **Principal Leadership in School Improvement**

Leithwood et al., (2004) highlight the extreme importance of effective leadership in school improvement proposing that principal leadership is second only to instructing among factors impacting student learning. Nikolaros (2014) also sheds light on the connectedness of leadership experience, passion, pride, ethics, resiliency, and relationships in the context of strategic planning, reform, and professional learning. As educational quality has increasingly been defined by test scores and student growth, principal preparation and the pace it has kept with policy changes and requirements should be seriously considered for successful implementation of school improvement initiatives (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). In light of the most recent federal and state mandates, principals should be more in tune than ever with skills and expertise required to lead schools utilizing strategic data-driven improvement initiatives,

especially if there will truly be more state and local control to address school improvement as suggested by ESSA (Klein, 2016). Considering that principals are learning through experience and that experience leads to perception while ultimately impacting agency and efficacy, it is important to explore factors influencing behavior leading to optimal performance (Bandura, 1977). Greater student achievement is the ultimate goal, and principals are a catalyst propelling their schools in the quest for optimal school improvement.

Though challenging, some building leaders successfully navigate the sometimes treacherous and ever changing school improvement waters due in part to quality professional learning (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Principal learning is often overlooked as a vehicle for continuous improvement, but principal educational level also positively correlates with important identified leadership factors including group goals, support, reflection, and high expectations (Valentine & Prater, 2011). Additionally, formal investment in school improvement training is also suggested to develop and improve the quality of school improvement leadership (Bouchamma et al., 2014). Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) posit there is a relationship between leadership quality and school improvement generating consideration of leadership development and how leaders are prepared to lead school improvement. The pathway to effective leadership is thought to include skill refinement, knowledge attainment, and acquired wisdom in stages and at different times loosely connecting with experiential learning (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). While wisdom is valued, it takes time to acquire it. Some principals are in their first years of leading school improvement, and while lack of experience for new leaders is inevitable in the beginning, schools and leaders are still held accountable for improving schools. What can be learned from others and their experiences in order to effectively build greater knowledge and

skills and efficacious principal behaviors, rather than passively waiting for time to pass to acquire essential wisdom related to school improvement?

Attempting to conceptualize the term self-efficacy for principals, Fischer (2011) studied training programs which appeared to change principals' perceptions of self-efficacy, and concluded that proper leadership training does increase efficacy perceptions. After all, the better equipped principals are to lead, the more successful they and their schools will be (Fischer, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Killion (2015) also looked at principals' practices and instructional climate, principals' efficacy beliefs, turnover rates, and student achievement in relation to leadership programming in Michigan. Leadership programming appeared to lead to increased self-efficacy in principal leadership and instructional climate, and higher principal self-efficacy led to reduced turnover (Killion, 2015). High levels of self-efficacy appear to positively correlate with high levels of preparation, but the missing element in most self-efficacy research is a qualitative voice (Fischer, 2001). Previous self-efficacy research has relied heavily on quantitative, survey-based research instead of qualitative study which would help to learn even more about the daily workings of principals in the context of school improvement (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014).

Though enigmatic at times, success with school improvement is entirely possible. As the research suggests, schools, systems, and principals are in constant search of the right formula leading to optimal student achievement (Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). It is important to know the impact of school improvement processes on principal agency, or action to achieve, and self-efficacy, or belief in one's self, to successfully reach goal attainment. Triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 2001) and the manner in which behavioral, environmental, and personal factors influence principal experiences with school improvement should be described and studied

qualitatively detailing how to best provide support for those directly responsible for school improvement, especially novices. Overall, research on novice principals predates high-stakes accountability requirements (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Spillane, Harris, Jones, & Mertz, 2015). This research seeks to describe the experiences of principals leading school improvement under NCLB and now ESSA to provide valuable insight leading to potential support structures for seasoned and novice principals alike.

Reform efforts can be as diverse as schools themselves, but there appears to be a common thread. As different as approaches to school reform are, success is dependent upon the motivation and capacity of leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory includes components related to attention, memory, and motivation, ultimately influencing and building greater leadership capacity for successful school improvement.

The impact of principal leadership is also suggested to be largest in schools with struggling students (Leithwood et al., 2004). To effectively facilitate school improvement implementation, specifically in high poverty schools such as the ones included for this study, there must be strong instructional and cultural leadership (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Dolph, 2016; Lindahl, 2014). In another related study, principals promoting instructional and curricula-related strategies are also linked to higher student achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2011). Dolph (2016) extended this concept to school improvement leadership improvement by encouraging leaders to focus on three skills for successful improvement including (1) leading instruction, (2) building culture, and (3) leading change. According to Bandura (1977), each leader has a base of experience related to each skill. As such, how do leaders go about facilitating broader, deeper, and more meaningful learning so that reciprocal determinism can impact more successful leadership for school improvement? School improvement is a complex,

multi-faceted process which takes time not only to implement but also to understand, especially in the context of leadership (Feldhoff et al., 2016). Triadic reciprocal determinism (1977) permits a framework for better understanding of principal experiences, while leading school improvement, paving the way for deeper understanding and potential application.

### **Data-Driven School Improvement Leadership**

Greater accountability for student achievement has added exponentially to the focus on data use for school improvement (Marsh & Farrell, 2014). “Principals play active policy roles in negotiating federal regulations and local initiatives, as well as selectively performing assessment and accountability mandates” (Koyama, 2014, p. 279). Data-driven school improvement leadership has become the norm, and leaders consistently select how to engage with data and accountability. To provide greater continuity, O’Day (2002) proposes a framework for analyzing the effectiveness of school improvement initiatives and leadership in the age of data-driven accountability using prioritized teaching and learning, motivation, development of knowledge and skills, and resource allocation. Attending to teaching and learning is of primary importance in accountability, and there should be motivation among educators to implement specific data-driven strategies (O’Day, 2002). Using data to drive improvement should be viewed as a vital part of any accountability framework, and allocating resources in the area of data management and analysis is necessary to meet challenges of goal attainment (O’Day, 2002; Ramsteck, Muslic, Graf, Maier, & Kuper, 2014).

It is commonplace in schools across the United States to hear the phrase, “Data rich, information poor.” How numbers or quantities are reported, used, and translated opens up a wealth of conversation related to school improvement and student achievement. Beaver and Weinbaum (2015) studied how schools make sense of data and found that categorizing data use

helps schools manage the plethora of data available. The inundation of numerical measures associated with student learning has led to much discussion regarding assessment measures and what should be counted, highlighting a need to better manage data in the information age. Beaver and Weinbaum (2015) identified categories or themes helping to drive successful school improvement suggesting how to derive meaning from performance-based testing systems. In fact, use of data to guide and prioritize school improvement initiatives specifically emerged as a central theme (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015). Still, data management and use are not always equal (Ramsteck et al., 2014). While some schools implement major efforts and commit substantial time in response to data, other schools and leaders commit little time and effort involving minimal stakeholders (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015). Lack of thorough disaggregation with equal attention to breadth and depth can produce false security, ineffective leadership, as well as increase alarm related to school improvement.

Further demonstrating inconsistencies present in data-driven school leadership, Demski and Racherbaumer (2015) highlighted the increasing importance of systematically analyzing preexisting school structures and conditions for successful data-driven school improvement leadership. What preexisting conditions possibly better inform data-driven improvement? Focusing on a more global perspective of data-driven leadership, it is suggested that leadership associated with data-driven best practices is often too narrowly defined, and should be considered in relation to building leadership capacity in others from a distributed leadership perspective (Demski & Racherbaumer, 2015). Again, more collaborative experiences with school improvement leadership impact triadic reciprocal determinism ultimately affecting agency and efficacy (Bandura, 1978). If the goal is to “professionalize school processes for

student learning and thus to achieve high school quality,” data use should be professionalized by capable leaders (Merki, 2014, p. 593).

Marsh and Farrell (2014) also attempted to build on the concept of data-driven decision making and what practices principals might use to build capacity among staff to more successfully drive school improvement efforts. Marsh and Farrell (2014) practically suggested interventions for school leaders using a case study model and proposed a set of basic data-driven practices for leaders to encourage strategic data use including (1) determining needs, (2) modeling, (3) observing data-driven instruction, (4) providing constructive feedback, and (5) connecting with resources for effective accountability-driven learning environments. These proposed data-driven practices have roots in the concept of human agency as suggested by Bandura (2001) including intention, forethought, regulation, and reflection. Still, with broad access to a plethora of data both internally and externally and with proposed sets of best practices, school leaders are not always aware of how to conceptualize and utilize data to produce achievement gains. Principals are encouraged to explore concepts to guide data-driven decision making processes using reflective questioning. These reflective questions include (1) What is the level of data literacy in the building?, (2) Are resources provided to build data capacity? (3) How are data-based learning supports provided?, and (4) How does the principal demonstrate data-driven school improvement leadership? (Marsh & Farrell, 2014).

Furthering capitalizing on the suggested requirement of strong instructional and cultural leadership among principals (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Lindahl, 2014), Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, and Thomas (2015) suggest frameworks for obtaining data, reflecting on information, aligning programs with data, designing instruction based on data, providing feedback related to information, and analyzing assessments. “The work of school leadership is undergoing a

revolution” (Halverson et al., 2015, p. 448). Modern transformational school improvement leadership requires data-driven, instructional leadership in districts and schools (Halverson et al., 2015). Stressing the importance of support for principals in the data-driven school improvement process, district support plays a critical role in obtaining and disseminating data for school improvement use (Halverson et al., 2015). Even district support structures sometimes fall short in supporting data use structures for school leaders (Jerryerson, 2014). Jerryerson (2014), recognizing the lack of needed support for building level leaders, recommended closely analyzing perceptions related to data-driven practices and perceptively stated that implementation science indicates repeatedly that context, in the realm of school improvement, does indeed matter. “System leaders may be tempted to overlay a process or expectation from another context without carefully considering current strengths or needs in the target context” (Jerryerson, 2014, p. 79). A large part of the proposed context relates to building level leaders who are expected to perform tasks, such as data use, for which they may not possess expertise leading to increased feelings of helplessness and decreased efficacy (Jerryerson, 2014). Likewise, in order to succeed with any new mandates associated with school improvement, further research is required to examine successes across a diverse range of behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences to bring in proper context. Findings in proper context could potentially generate purposeful, productive thinking about what does work when leading school improvement (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016).

Due to the quantitative nature of school improvement, accountability has primarily been connected with assessment data. School improvement efforts are currently driven by data associated with federal and state accountability systems. How exactly do principals use data to drive and lead school improvement? Is their success connected with proven methodologies

increasing self-efficacy and sense of agency? (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015). If so, are policy debates including real accounts of how principals are using data-driven improvement in everyday practice, and exactly how effective are school improvement practices overall?

### **Navigating Change**

School improvement at its most basic level constitutes change (Protheroe, 2011). Related to triadic reciprocal determinism (1977), Kilgore and Reynolds (2011) suggest that productive change necessitates changes in perception and action. The role of change, and the principal as primary facilitator of change in school improvement, cannot be ignored (Feldhoff et al. 2014). In a groundbreaking meta-analysis based on 30 years of research and involving almost 3,000 schools, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) focused on relationships between leadership and student achievement and addressed change in connection with school improvement. It was suggested that effective leaders know how to balance initiatives related to change while protecting school culture and values (Waters et al., 2003). How well will principals balance changes associated with ESSA? Successful leaders should also be well-acquainted with the amount of change required to achieve tasks and adjust leadership styles accordingly (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). It is quite difficult to pre-gauge the amount of change required due to the infancy of the shift to ESSA. Therefore, once again, principals are learning by doing (Crum et al., 2010). It, therefore, becomes increasingly important to describe principal experiences with school improvement in the newest age of accountability while learning by doing (Crum et al., 2010).

A changing landscape in education permeating the educational arena in the last decade was attention to subgroup performance. It appears that this emphasis is continued in ESSA (Klein, 2016). “Closing the achievement gap” and its connection to NCLB was a phrase often

used in educational jargon and heard in school improvement-related conversations (Groen, 2012; United States Government, 2016). Huber and Conway (2015) suggest that in order to truly affect subgroup performance, SIP goals should be written focusing on subgroups not making gains, and should address skills causing current gaps. In fact, attention to subgroup performance is not going away, but progress and goal attainment in this area will now be determined by states and local districts (Klein, 2016). Another change recommended in school improvement planning is to SIP implementation itself which should contain strategies for changing adult behaviors, as described by Bandura in social learning theory (1978), in addition to student behaviors to achieve goals (Huber & Conway, 2015).

Marks and Printy (2003), in a seminal study of transformational leadership (TL), also address the concept of change and school improvement. TL emphasizes change, and change is seen as the vehicle producing greater outcomes (Yang, 2014). In TL, ideas are generated differently, and leaders are expected to approach solutions more creatively. TL in the form of crafting and sustaining a vision and providing steps to achieve vision also has a strong relationship to achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2011). A practical example of transformational leadership can be seen in a study conducted by Madzikanda (2015). In order to increase student outcomes, Madzikanda (2015) advocated bringing in real-world learning models for students, connecting thought with application in an effort to transform learning. This same transformation of learning can be applied similarly to utilizing optimal leadership strategies increasing student achievement.

Creating an even greater challenge for school leaders in the newest age of accountability while addressing school improvement in light of systemic change, principals are faced with issues never before experienced (Marks & Printy, 2003). For example, there are new standards,

frameworks for instruction, and assessments. In fact, these elements change frequently, and educators are often encouraged to view standards, frameworks, and common assessments as fluid and modified as needed based on instruction and the needs of students. To better manage change in the context of school improvement, greater collaboration must be included to engage teachers and leaders in dialogue about issues and implications (Marks & Printy, 2003). Arguably, change and progress have sometimes become synonymous. To see this concept in action, look to ESSA and its promises of more localized control of mandated accountability. How principals will fare in the newest age of legislated school accountability is yet to be determined, but much can be learned from listening to personal accounts of behavioral, environmental, and personal accounts during this shift. By capturing the essence of elementary principals' experiences with school improvement through qualitative methods and using the theoretical lens of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, a basis for understanding beliefs in one's self and abilities to lead school improvement during changing mandates will be added to the body of literature connecting leadership and school improvement.

Further capitalizing on the concept of change, Moolenaar and Slegers (2015) also suggest TL as a possible mechanism that may shape patterns of relationships, connecting social elements with leadership style and effectiveness. While Bandura's (1978) triadic reciprocal determinism explains the interconnectedness of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors which include a multitude of social aspects within the triad, there are potential connections between characteristics associated with TL and reciprocal determinants if principal voices could be heard in the transition from NCLB to ESSA. With increasing accountability and pressures for schools to improve through collaboration, it is critical for principals to have close social relationships (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015).

Extending the line of thought associated with social relationships and TL, Nir and Hamieri (2014) looked at mechanisms principals employ as means to increase school performance and hypothesized that school leaders' use social powerbases to change attitudes and behaviors influencing greater school outcomes. Findings indicated that powerbases are differentiated between effective and ineffective schools and that more effective leaders use social expertise and reward (Nir & Hamieri, 2014). There is also an emerging emphasis in psychology related to recognizing how social contexts are integral components of human activity (Spillane, Harris, Jones, & Mertz, 2015). Principals' sense of agency and self-efficacy and their impact on school improvement is related to the concept of powerbase or abilities to change attitudes and behaviors impacting future interpretations of triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 2001).

Additionally, Yang (2014) proposes that TL is the most important type of leadership to guide change and successful school improvement, and suggests that TL is required for successful implementation of action to achieve identified goals. Yang (2014) also describes two case studies in which the concept of TL is explored. TL skills consist of generating ideas, developing a shared vision and commitment, distributing leadership, and achieving credibility (Yang, 2014). Finally, Yang (2014) suggests that identifying problems and defining relationships between problems and solutions are the major areas of focus in a principal's journey to achieve successful transformational practices.

Associated with Georgia's required leadership practices under ESSA and in alignment with Yang's (2014) findings related to shared leadership, distributed leadership also plays a role in a study conducted by Kelley and Dikkers (2016) focusing on leadership practices helping to increase student achievement and assist with school improvement. Kelley and Dikkers (2016) suggest that in order to increase leadership capacity among staff, principals should require

transparency in student and staff assessments, generating collaborative discussions. These collaborative, capacity-building sessions are suggested to ultimately impact practices leading to greater improvement and achievement (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016).

However, another related study produced conflicting findings. Day et al. (2016) describe how leaders can successfully combine instructional components and TL. Using mixed methods investigating the work of principals and student outcomes, principals and staff members were surveyed about strategies promoting student achievement. Twenty in-depth case studies were also completed. Findings indicated that school improvement and sustainability are not the result of a specific leadership style such as TL or distributed leadership would suggest, but successful school improvement leadership is closely related to principal comprehension and analysis of school instructional needs along with application of shared values and beliefs as a part of school culture (Day et al., 2016).

Valentine and Prater (2011) also studied instructional and transformational leadership in high schools and how leadership qualities were related to student achievement. Leadership strategies focusing on instructional and curriculum improvements were again linked to greater student achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2011). Likewise, abilities to articulate a vision and model behaviors, qualities found in TL, had the greatest relationship to achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2011). Similarly, Marks and Printy (2003) analyzed over 20 restructured schools and found that TL is necessary but insufficient to produce optimal student achievement. TL and instructional leadership must be integrated and further developed in order to promote substantial growth in ever-changing accountability systems (Marks & Printy, 2003). As principals are primarily learning through experience, it is important to look at various components influencing behavior leading to greater leadership performance for optimal school improvement.

## **Pathways for Greater Success**

Killion (2015) suggests that attention to quality principal leadership development can lead to a variety of positive changes related to principal efficacy and agency producing increased student achievement. But despite progress, there is an inherent impression that principals still lack the knowledge and skill to develop capacity for change due to school improvement process complexity (Feldhoff, Radish, & Bischof, 2014). Triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978) supports the idea that approaches and success with school improvement can change depending on the interaction between factors (Bouchamma, Basque, & Marcotte, 2014). The movement from NCLB to ESSA highlights interactive triadic changes that can occur during this accountability shift. It is important to describe principal experiences during this time in order to capture personal perspectives leading to possible supports for future change. Capturing the principal voice can pave future pathways to achieve greater success with school improvement (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014).

In a recent but isolated study, Cherkowski and Walker (2016) did utilize qualitative means to capture principal voice through stories and explanations to describe the general concept of “flourishing” among principals. While there was no single definition of what it meant to succeed in the work of schools, descriptions from principals indicated feelings of success when working collaboratively and purposefully with teachers to create continuously improved learning environments (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016). In the high-stakes world of school reform and legislated accountability, should principals, as primary leaders of school improvement, be consulted and their experiences considered when creating effective accountability systems? (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Or, has ESSA, in the attempt to provide greater local autonomy, merely

assumed that principals will be happier and more successful with the emphasis on the “whole child” and mandated involvement of larger numbers of shared stakeholders (Klein, 2016)?

Quantitative findings emphasize that district leaders can build greater confidence and efficacy among principals by focusing on achievement and instructional priorities, assisting with targeted foci for school improvement efforts, and by building cooperative relationships (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). In the case of principals working under new accountability mandates, triadic reciprocal determinism may help explain how behavioral, environmental, and personal factors work interactively to produce confidence and effectiveness. For in social learning theory, all three types of variables continuously interact determining self-efficacy and agency, which can best be described using first-hand knowledge through personal experience (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010). Dolph (2016) also recognized that principals are in the position to have the most direct impact on teachers providing appropriate layers of support for building greater commitment to continuous improvement. “Principals have positional power to make significant differences in student achievement” (Dolph, 2016, p. 373). Considering the vital role principals play in school improvement, it is important to study how reciprocal determinants interact as new accountability mandates are enacted.

### **Summary**

It has been repeatedly suggested that one of the most important aspects of school improvement is effective leadership (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015; Day et al., 2016; Demski & Racherbaumer, 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). There is also quantitative research suggesting leadership-related strategies to increase student achievement (Airola et al., 2014; Merki, 2014). To ensure that increased accountability is not reduced to singular quantitative study and conclusion, which dominates current accountability systems and self-

efficacy studies, federal, state, and district leaders need to hear the voices of principals who are directly responsible for planning, implementing, and leading school improvement structures associated with changing mandates (Braun et al., 2011; Chappelle & Price, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). The problem is that the principals' voices describing experiences with school improvement efforts are largely missing in research (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014). Qualitative data describing principal experiences with school improvement will provide a comprehensive picture of improvement giving voice to school leaders during the important shift from NCLB to ESSA (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014). Insights into the experiences of principals can potentially shape the way future improvement processes, expectations, and supports are structured allowing access to stronger support systems (Gaffney, Dawson, & Lock, 2012).

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This transcendental phenomenological study described elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability. In this chapter, the research design was discussed, and questions were articulated guiding the focus of the study. The specific setting for the study and participants were identified, while procedures were also defined, permitting replication if necessary. The role of the researcher as the human instrument was addressed, and data collection and analysis were explained. The chapter ended with a discussion of researcher responsibilities including trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

### **Design**

Principals are ultimately responsible for carrying out school improvement rules and requirements in their respective schools. However, principal voices describing experiences related to school improvement in the age of accountability are largely missing, limiting practical application (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014; Superville, 2016). More research is needed about school improvement experiences in different qualitative contexts. Qualitative research permits the researcher to “hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). The complicated nature of school improvement requires complex study using the stories of principals who experience school improvement in behavioral, environmental, and personal contexts, deepening understanding of processes, responses, and thought. “Evidence from phenomenological research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Therefore, a qualitative study was conducted using Moustakas’ (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach in an effort to describe participant

experiences based on perception, senses, and knowledge. The transcendental phenomenological approach was applicable to this study because it allowed participants to tell personal stories giving “meaning, structure, and essence of lived experiences” (Patton, 2015, p. 98). In this study, participants described experiences with school improvement in the newest age of accountability moving from NCLB to ESSA. As a conceptual framework, transcendental phenomenology is associated with Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, whose love for philosophy led to his development of “subjective openness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). As a follower of Husserl’s work, Moustakas (2004) also attempted to gain knowledge through the study of experience and reflection. While studying van Manen’s (1990) and Moustakas’ (1994) texts, I believed that the transcendental phenomenological philosophy allowed thorough exploration of principal experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability using their own voices revealing meaning and truth. While hermeneutic phenomenology relies on interpretation (van Manen, 1990), transcendental phenomenology emphasizes moving away from preconceived notions allowing the meaning of phenomena to transcend or emerge through analysis of textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Quantifiable measures permeate the current research landscape studying leadership in school improvement (Braun et al., 2011; Chappellear & Price, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). A qualitative, phenomenological study makes meaning of action, behavior, intention, and experience as it happens in the real world (van Manen, 1990). Thus, a phenomenological approach was appropriate to study elementary principal experiences with school improvement in light of changing federal and state mandates moving from NCLB to ESSA. Phenomenology allowed me to understand the essence of principal experiences with school improvement through synthesis of meaning (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological study also

permitted me to look deeply at principals who share experiences of leading school improvement under two different mandates. Additionally, phenomenology lent itself to interviews and deep analysis permitting the principal voice to be heard in an effort to distinguish between behavioral, environmental, and personal factors describing the essence of experience with school improvement (Creswell, 2013). “Epoche,” or setting aside prejudgments, was demonstrated by reflexive journaling throughout the research process to view described experiences with a fresh lens and perspective (Moustakas, 1994). It is this fresh perspective which allowed transcendence of experience based on textural and structural descriptions, leading to composite description presenting the essence of principal experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability. While the purpose of the study was to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability, the goal for readers using this design was to feel they have a better understanding of what it is like to be a principal leading school improvement under changing mandates in the newest age of accountability.

### **Research Questions**

Because this transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability, the following central research question and sub-questions guided the study focus:

**CQ:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe their experiences with school improvement?

**SQ1:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe behavioral experiences with school improvement?

**SQ2:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I

Schools describe environmental experiences with school improvement?

**SQ3:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I

Schools describe personal experiences with school improvement?

### **Setting**

The study took place in Title I elementary public schools in Northeast Georgia. Within Northeast Georgia, there are two specified Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) zones serving 28 school systems and containing over 120 total elementary schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Elementary schools in Northeast Georgia serve grade levels pre-k through five or kindergarten through grade five. Northeast Georgia is a diverse geographic area consisting mostly of suburban and rural school districts. Within this diversity, there is poverty across the entire region, and almost all school systems have Title I schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Schools with 40% or above poverty percentages are eligible to receive “Total Title I” status as well as federal funding based on free and reduced lunch percentages (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). To receive Title I funding, school improvement plans must be completed annually for schools with Title I designations.

Annual reports are also provided at the state level recognizing progress toward school improvement goals. Georgia’s College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI), in existence for six years, is touted to be a school improvement and accountability platform for stakeholders reporting annual measures and ultimately assigning levels (A, B,C, D, and F) for public schools throughout the state (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Therefore, principals with three or more years of experience in their current schools, had first-hand knowledge and rich experience with school improvement mandates and reporting under both NCLB and now ESSA. Mandated school improvement planning and implementation is

generally overseen at the district level to ensure compliance, but actual implementation occurs at the school level under the leadership of the principal. Principals in Georgia are formally evaluated annually on their performance using the Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES) considering student growth information, school climate surveys, and additional data sources (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

Elementary principals help establish firm foundations for future student success as students move on to middle and high school, and experiences leading school improvement impact elementary principals in greater numbers, as there are larger numbers of elementary schools across Northeast Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). As part of the study, interviews will take place in individual elementary school buildings to provide comfort in setting and natural environment (Patton, 2015). The large focus group interview will take place electronically via ZOOM Google technology permitting clarification of initial findings while promoting greater trust and transparency (Creswell, 1994).

### **Participants**

Polkinghorne (1989) suggested a range of five to 25 individuals to be included in phenomenological study. To secure 12 participants for this study, participants were selected using three methods of purposeful sampling in the form of snowballing, using superintendent referrals to select participants (see Appendix B), intensity, including only participants with a minimum of three years of experience, and maximum variation, incorporating a selection of participants based on differing demographics (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Superintendent referrals also increased the likelihood of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Using the referrals from superintendents, I began to compile a list of potential principal study participants while waiting on Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix

A). Once official IRB approval was granted, participant consent was obtained (see Appendices C, D, and E) prior to data collection. As such, data were collected from all participants to provide a comprehensive description of experiences with school improvement in an effort to achieve data saturation. The participant group was bound by elementary principals with at least three years of completed experience leading a Title I school in their current location. The group was purposefully bound by these parameters so that the phenomenon of principal experience with school improvement in the age of accountability, specifically moving from NCLB to ESSA, was captured and fully described.

The participants were selected among Title I elementary schools in Northeast Georgia. The current demographics for elementary principals in the Northeast Georgia region consist of a majority of female, Caucasian leaders and this composition was reflected in study participants (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). A geographic sampling of elementary principals in NEGA Title I schools with adequate attention to the maximum variation principle attempted to include diversity in gender, setting, total years of experience, race/ethnicity, and perceptions of self-efficacy in an effort to increase potential transferability of findings (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). As data were collected, pseudonyms were used and assigned in alphabet order by gender for organization, and participant anonymity was protected.

Table 1

*Study Participants' Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Setting	Years of Experience	Race/Ethnicity
Ann	Female	Rural	5	Caucasian
Beth	Female	Suburban	7	Caucasian
Chloe	Female	Rural	11	Caucasian
Debra	Female	Suburban	15	Caucasian
Eve	Female	Suburban	3.5	Caucasian
Fiona	Female	Rural	8	Caucasian
Geneva	Female	Rural	10	Caucasian
Hope	Female	Suburban	10	Caucasian
Isabel	Female	Rural	10	Caucasian
Jerry	Male	Suburban	15	Caucasian
Kirk	Male	Suburban	10.5	Caucasian
Luke	Male	Rural	17	Caucasian

To further delineate study participants, a descriptive Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES) was included (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). “The PSES instrument is copyrighted by the authors, however, there are no copyright restrictions on the instrument for use in scholarly research and for non-profit educational purposes,” so no permission for use in this study was required to be obtained (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 583). The PSES is made of up 18

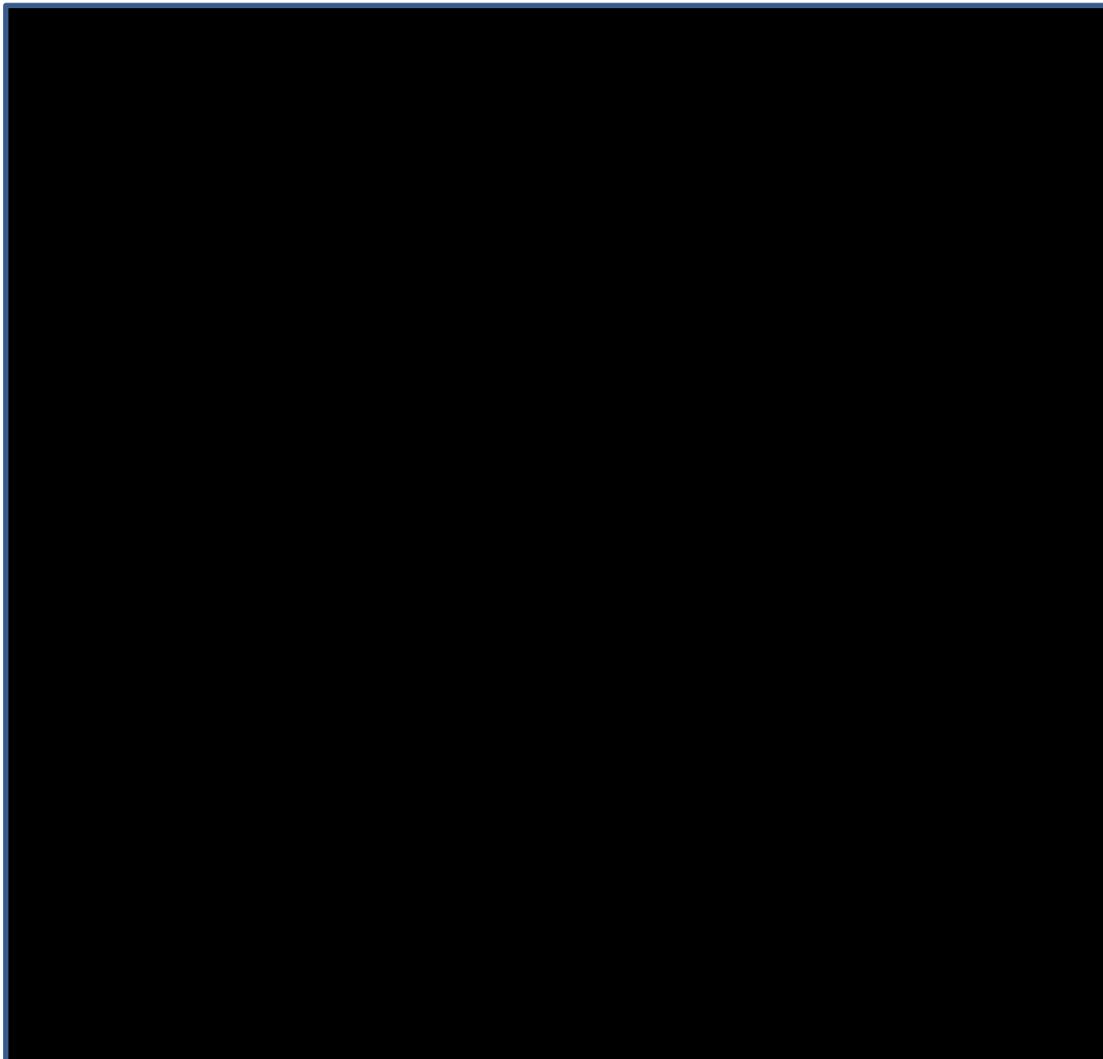
items assessing perceptions of self-efficacy using a Likert-type scale (see Appendix F). A confirmatory factor analysis of the PSES conducted by Smith and Guarino (2005) reveals construct validity ( $p < .01$ ) and high goodness of fit indices (i.e.,  $> .99$ ) for both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). In this qualitative study, the survey was used for descriptive purposes only. Again, pseudonyms were used in alphabet order by gender for organization, and participant anonymity was protected.

Table 2

*PSES Self-Efficacy Reports*

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STATEMENTS:



Anchored Scale 1=None 3=Very little 5=Some degree 7=Quite a bit 9=A great deal

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Rating</u>																	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Ann	9	9	5	9	7	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Beth	7	5	5	7	7	7	5	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	7	5	7	7
Chloe	9	9	9	9	9	9	7	7	7	7	7	7	9	9	9	9	9	9
Debra	9	9	9	9	7	7	7	7	9	9	9	7	9	9	9	7	7	9
Eve	9	9	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	9	7	7	7	9	5	9	9	5
Fiona	7	9	5	5	7	7	7	9	7	9	9	7	7	9	7	9	9	9
Geneva	7	7	9	9	7	7	9	9	9	9	9	7	9	9	9	9	9	9
Hope	7	7	3	5	5	5	7	7	5	9	9	5	7	9	7	5	9	9
Isabel	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	7	7
Jerry	7	7	5	7	7	9	7	7	7	7	7	7	9	9	7	9	9	9
Kirk	7	6	6	5	7	7	5	5	6	7	6	6	5	7	5	7	7	7
Luke	9	7	7	9	7	7	7	7	7	9	7	7	9	9	7	7	7	7

### Procedures

Initially, I contacted superintendents in Northeast Georgia (see Appendix B) to obtain permission and participant recommendations for study using snowballing, intensity, and

maximum variation, all purposeful sampling techniques (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). This primary contact helped to ensure a greater likelihood that a sufficient number of participants were secured. I then submitted an official proposal and ultimately secured Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). While waiting for approval, four experts in the field reviewed study interview questions in an effort to increase interview question quality (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Suggestions were made to verbally include during interviews examples of behavioral experiences (levels of success and productivity), environmental experiences (social and physical components), and personal experiences (emotions and self-efficacy) providing further clarity for participants during interviews. After IRB permission had been obtained, two experts in the field were used outside of the study to further clarify precise wording of questions before embarking on official data collection (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Suggestions from field testing included a visual timeline reference for participants during interviewing to place questions in proper context under NCLB and ESSA (see Appendix L).

Once identified by superintendents and after securing IRB approval, potential participants were sent through an email invitation to participate, outlining the purpose and procedures involved in the study (see Appendix C). Participants indicating a desire to participate were then sent an official consent form for review and signature through email clearly articulating study benefits, voluntary withdrawal options, anonymity, data collection, and information analysis (see Appendices D and E) (Creswell, 2013). Once participant consent was obtained, either through email with a signed and scanned attachment or on site the day of the scheduled interview, I administered a descriptive survey using the PSES developed by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) to provide a more robust picture of principal demographics including gender, setting,

years of experience, ethnicity, and self-perceptions of efficacy (see Appendix F). Each participant was then interviewed one-to-one using semi-structured, open-ended interviews on their own campus (Creswell, 2013). The interview data were gathered, were recorded through audiotaped recordings using two devices as they were completed, and were reviewed by participants for accuracy. Once participants submitted SIPs after interviews, document analysis of individual school improvement plans for three consecutive years was utilized allowing the researcher to access a more complete picture of school improvement processes and progress, deepening exploration of principal experiences (Creswell, 2013). Finally, using a focus group, a prompted, video-taped online discussion among participants via Google ZOOM was held as a system of checks and balances to weed out extremes (Patton, 2015). Due to one of the participants having to reschedule the initial one-to-one interview three times due to conflicts, one participant was unable to be invited to participate in the focus group, but results were reviewed and clarification sought from the participant as needed. All collected audio and visual data were transcribed using a transcriptionist, and data collection continued until data saturation was reached (Moustakas, 1994).

### **The Researcher's Role**

As the human instrument, a qualitative researcher should describe relevant personal aspects that may or may not impact abilities to conduct research (Greenbank, 2003). I am motivated to describe principal experiences with school improvement because of my personal experiences with NCLB and school improvement as a former middle school principal. My journey with school improvement was quantitatively successful, but success was often overshadowed by qualitative feelings of loneliness and isolation in a world driven by external mandates. To my knowledge, no manual exists for principals describing their role or how to

execute it with distinction in regard to school improvement, and the existence of instructions seems incongruous with the role of principal which is often assumed to be sage or all-knowing. Many principals feel uncomfortable expressing feelings of inadequacy because others might doubt their competence or performance. While working with multiple districts as a leadership specialist, I was overwhelmed by the mirror images I encountered. It appeared that external decisions were constantly being made in the name of accountability using quantitative means, including self-efficacy measures themselves, as reflected in singular survey-based research. Federal mandates, state mandates, and even district requirements were ultimately couched in the numbers, and student achievement results were reported by assessments that were not always reflective of standards or mastery of learning.

Perhaps because of my conditioning to the quantitative mindset, I became numb to the politicized nature of accountability and school improvement. ESSA, in its newest form, professes to honor the uniqueness of individual schools granting more flexibility to principals to use professional judgment guiding school improvement planning efforts, and even professes to lift the restrictive demands of “back to the basics” funding for Title I Schools. However, in my current role of district support, I often wonder if the years of restriction and limitation have affected principals’ self-confidence levels. Creativity with school improvement planning and funding are currently being encouraged under ESSA. In order to describe principal experiences with school improvement during this legislative shift, it is best to use qualitative research. The numbers simply cannot tell the whole story, and it is important to listen to principal voices sharing lived experiences in the newest age of accountability.

Five years have now passed since I last served as a middle school principal, and my distance from the position has allowed me to take a more qualitative perspective as a “human

instrument” (Moustakas, 1994). My work in the Northeast Georgia region has also allowed me to interact with various leaders in multiple districts. The middle school principal community is a small one, but the amount of time that has passed and the elementary focus of the study allowed for a more objective view in different contexts. My relationship with study participants, based on Superintendent referrals, included no evaluative authority. This is important so that participants can speak freely and honestly. Additionally, as the “human instrument,” it was critical to bracket out my own views and experiences using epoche in an effort to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon of principal experiences with school improvement (Moustakas, 1994). It is important to get to the objective structures of the experiences, and this was accomplished by reflexive journaling throughout the study. “Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative study used transcendental phenomenology to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. Data collection began once IRB approval for the research was obtained (see Appendix A). Data triangulation using multiple data sources including interviews (one-to-one and focus group) and document analysis also established greater credibility (Schwandt, 2015). A descriptive survey was used to provide context only.

The researcher, as the “human instrument” collected data to better grasp the phenomenon of experiences with school improvement through the lens of elementary principals (Moustakas, 1994). First, I used a descriptive self-efficacy survey (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004) to provide a robust picture of principal demographics and self-efficacy beliefs. Next, individual interviews were conducted to gather voice. Document analyses of individual school

improvement plans for the last three years were also included after completion of interviews to further support themes emerging from interviews. Finally, a focus group was convened to provide a system of checks and balances (Patton, 2015).

### **Descriptive Survey**

Though not qualitative in design, the utilization of a descriptive survey provided additional insight into participant characteristics adding context to the study (Huberman & Miles, 2002). I obtained permission from participants (see Appendices D and E) and administered a descriptive survey (see Appendix F) to participants using the PSES developed by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004). This descriptive survey provided demographics including ethnicity, gender, setting, years of experience, as well as self-perceptions of efficacy. Using responses from the descriptive survey, participant diversity in ethnicity, gender, setting, years of total experience, and self-efficacy perceptions more accurately provided context for the study. The PSES is made of up 18 items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (none) to 9 (a great deal) (See Appendix F). The PSES contains items associated with self-efficacy in management, instruction, and leadership (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Scores on the PSES can be as high as 162 with higher scores reflecting higher ratings of principal self-efficacy. “The PSES instrument is copyrighted by the authors, however, there are no copyright restrictions on the instrument for use in scholarly research and for non-profit educational purposes,” so no permission for use in this study is required to be obtained (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 583). A confirmatory factor analysis of the PSES conducted by Smith and Guarino (2005) reveals construct validity ( $p < .01$ ) and high goodness of fit indices (i.e.,  $> .99$ ) for both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Bentler & Bonett, 1980).

## Interviews

Prior to IRB approval, expert reviews of open-ended questions were conducted with area experts to increase interview question quality related to applicability and ease of understanding (Creswell, 2013). Once IRB approval was received, pilot interviews took place to further ensure the presence of high-quality questions. Then, participant consent was obtained, and I conducted one-to-one, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with participants on their own campus (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of interviewing as described by Patton (2015) is to gain the other person's perspective. In an effort to gain perspectives based on the experiences of principals, the participants answered 19 semi-structured, open-ended questions about school improvement leadership experiences. Notes were taken during each interview, audio recording was used on two devices, and transcriptionist services were employed. Participants were sent transcriptions for review and possible corrections if needed upon completion of the transcript. Once transcriptions were approved, interviews were imported into the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti for organization and analysis. Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological analysis process was utilized including horizontalization, clustering of themes, moving to textural and structural descriptions, concluding with composite descriptions capturing "essence." Semi-structured questions were divided into five categories. Opening questions captured background information about principal experience. Questions related to school improvement leadership experiences under NCLB provided insight into prior experiences. Questions related to school improvement leadership experiences under ESSA shed light on current experiences, while attempting to make possible connections with the past. Questions related to experiences leading school improvement under changing federal and state mandates were intended to reveal insights

into possible future assistance and support. Finally, questions related to the role of expert permitted participants to critically analyze, synthesize, and evaluate experiences with school improvement, while taking on the role of mentor. The questions were crafted to understand the phenomenon of principal experiences with school improvement. I used email to follow up on materials requiring additional clarification. Pseudonyms were used in alphabet order by gender for organization, and participant anonymity was protected.

### Open-Ended Interview Questions

#### Opening Questions

1. Please describe the journey that led you to becoming a principal.
2. What do you consider your most rewarding experiences as principal?
3. What do you consider your most challenging experiences as principal?

#### Questions Related to NCLB Experiences

4. Describe behavioral experiences with school improvement under NCLB.
5. Describe environmental experiences with school improvement under NCLB.
6. Describe personal experiences with school improvement under NCLB.
7. How did these experiences impact you and your confidence leading school improvement?

#### Questions Related to ESSA Experiences

8. Describe behavioral experiences with school improvement under ESSA.
9. Describe environmental experiences with school improvement under ESSA.
10. Describe personal experiences with school improvement under ESSA.
11. How do these experiences impact you and your confidence leading school improvement?

#### Questions Related to Experiences Leading School Improvement with Changing Mandates

12. How do you perceive the commonalities and differences associated with NCLB and ESSA?
13. Describe a time when you have felt successful with school improvement.
14. Describe a time when you felt unsuccessful with school improvement.
15. How do you think successes or challenges with school improvement impact you as a leader?
16. How could school improvement planning be designed and framed to better support leaders at the school level?

#### Questions Related to Role of Expert in Leading School Improvement

17. Reflecting on your experience as a principal, what advice would you give to new principals as they begin to work with accountability and school improvement?
18. Looking ahead to the new accountability requirements under ESSA, how do you expect your leadership to change or develop over the next several years?
19. We've covered a lot of ground, and I appreciate the time you have dedicated to this. One final question: What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experiences with school improvement?

“A good interview evokes thoughts, feeling, knowledge, and experience not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee” (Patton, 2015, p. 494). Interview questions attempted to fully engage participants with the phenomenon of principal experience with school improvement. General concepts were addressed in the beginning to establish comfort and moved to more focused and specific questions around the phenomenon of principal experience. The purpose of each question was to establish the basis for future findings (Patton, 2015). Due to the strategic language and precise manner in which questions were asked, optimal engagement and sharing of

the participant's experience with leading school improvement through interviews was encouraged (Moustakas, 1994).

Interviews began with opening questions to establish trust and engagement as questions are non-threatening and build rapport amongst researcher and participant (Patton, 2015). Leithwood et al. (2004) highlight the importance of effective leadership in school improvement proposing that principal leadership is second only to instructing among factors impacting student learning. Because of this important relationship and the need to connect previous experience in the context of strategic planning and reform, personal journeys are important to help more completely describe comprehensive experience (Nikolaros, 2014). Questions one through three were designed for this purpose.

Experiences with NCLB and ESSA were then explored in accordance with social learning theories of interaction as viewed through processes of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978). Questions four through seven related to leadership under NCLB, and questions eight through 11 related to the most recent ESSA school improvement leadership. According to Bandura (1978), behavioral, environmental, and personal factors work together as reciprocal determinants determining opportunities "for people to shape their destinies as well as the limits of self-direction" (Bandura, 1978, p. 357). Therefore, it was important to ask questions that assisted participants in reflecting on behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences with school improvement under both NCLB and ESSA. For it is these experiences, as suggested by Bandura (1978), that affect, principal self-efficacy, or belief in one's self as connected with performance of accountability-related job tasks (Airola et al., 2014; Bouchamma et al., 2016; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Self-efficacy perceptions influence behaviors ultimately leading to

performance, and transformative leadership is considered an important component of targeted action to achieve desired goals (Yang, 2014).

School improvement, at its most basic level, constitutes change (Protheroe, 2011). Because transformation and change are synonymous, interview questions 12 through 16 included an invitation to reflect on leading school improvement under changing mandates. Related to triadic reciprocal determinism (1977), Kilgore and Reynolds (2011) suggest that productive change necessitates revisions in perception and action. Waters et al. (2003) addressed change in connection with school improvement, suggesting effective leaders know how to balance initiatives related to change while protecting school culture and values. It is quite difficult to pre-gauge the amount of change required due to the infancy of the shift to ESSA. Principals are essentially learning by doing (Crum et al., 2010). As such, it becomes increasingly important to describe principal experiences with school improvement with NLCB as well as in the newest age of ESSA accountability, so that insights into the experiences of principals can potentially shape the way improvement processes, expectations, and supports are structured in the future (Superville, 2016).

Questions 17 through 19 encouraged participants to take on the role of expert in the interview to provide different data related to school improvement experiences, culminating with a one-shot question which encouraged the addition of desired information (Patton, 2015). Though accountability decisions, in the form of school improvement mandates, are made at the legislative level, requirements are communicated to districts and then principals (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Principals are ultimately responsible for implementing requirements and improving their schools (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Without strong, effective leadership, schools do not function optimally. Although ESSA seems to initially

promise what most educators have been advocating for, it may not be easy to implement (Klein, 2016). As schools work to develop continuous school improvement structures, leadership development and mentorship for principals and district leaders should be considered as a possible means of increasing sense of efficacy leading to greater agency, and indirectly supporting potential for improved school performance.

### **Document Analysis**

Historically, Title I schools are required to complete school improvement plans annually (see Appendix J). Included in this document, regardless of specific format, are needs assessments, data reviews, goals, strategies, artifacts, actions, funding sources, evaluations of implementation, communication methods, and extensive narratives describing processes and experiences (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). As such, individual school improvement plans for three consecutive years were analyzed. Gorichanaz and Latham (2016) suggest a framework for document analysis systematically breaking down documents into parts for meaningful, holistic understanding using intrinsic and extrinsic information. Likewise, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978), SIP documents were analyzed for emerging behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences based on significant statements identified previously during interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Because school improvement plans are required to be completed electronically, I was able to import them into the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti for organization and analysis. Document analysis allowed the researcher to access a more complete picture of school improvement experiences using corroboration with interviews while further describing the phenomenon of principal experiences with school improvement (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological analysis process was utilized with documents along with interviews

including horizontalization, clustering of themes, moving to textural and structural descriptions, and concluding with composite descriptions capturing “essence.” The goal was to allow the participants’ voices to be heard in the context of school improvement through the required format of the Title I school improvement plans, adding to and further supporting interview responses.

### **Focus Group**

As suggested by Patton (2015), focus groups, on average, are made up of six to 10 people and last from an hour to two hours. Focus groups can also be helpful as they tend to increase confidence in emerging patterns (Patton, 2015). As informed consent was already obtained for participants, the focus group served as a means to clarify understandings, meaning, and build trust (Stewart & Williams, 2005). As such, a video-taped online discussion among six participating principals, half of the sample size, took place via Google ZOOM. The session included standardized, semi-structured prompts stated verbally and visually using PowerPoint to provide a system of checks and balances to weed out extremes (Patton, 2015). I was somewhat disappointed that more of the principals were not able to participate, but I also understood they were very busy. Discussion was video recorded by using the Google ZOOM recording feature. Transcription was completed using a transcriptionist. Participants were given the opportunity review a transcript afterwards for accuracy. Focus groups are unique in that there are multiple participants, so protection of identity and information is not guaranteed. As such, when the completed transcription was reviewed by participants, another layer of anonymity using different alphabetized, gender-specific synonyms was ultimately added before final, comprehensive reporting.

### **Focus Group Questions**

### Opening Question

1. How are school improvement processes going so far this year?

### Questions Related to Triadic Reciprocal Determinism

2. Describe behavioral experiences with school improvement under NCLB and ESSA.
3. Describe environmental experiences with school improvement under NCLB and ESSA.
4. Describe personal experiences with school improvement under NCLB and ESSA.

### Questions Related to Leadership Empowerment

5. How did these experiences impact you and your confidence leading school improvement?
6. How do you think accountability should be structured in schools?
7. What additional support do you think would be helpful in leading school improvement?

### Questions Related to Principal Voice

8. If you had the ear of legislators who make laws concerning school improvement, what would you want them to know?
9. If you had the ear of district office leaders who oversee school improvement in your system, what would you want them to know?
10. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experiences with school improvement?

As proposed by Patton (2015), the inherent power of the focus group is in the title. Focus groups are focused, keeping responses on topic and target (Patton, 2015). Like the one-to-interviews, the focus group interview began with an opening question to establish trust and engagement as the question was non-threatening and built rapport amongst researcher and participant (Patton, 2015). Questions two through four involved social learning theories of interaction as viewed through processes of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978). According

to Bandura (1978), behavioral, environmental, and personal factors work together as reciprocal determinants determining opportunities “for people to shape their destinies as well as the limits of self-direction” (Bandura, 1978, p. 357). Therefore, it was important to ask questions that assisted participants in reflecting on behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences with school improvement under both NCLB and ESSA.

Questions five through seven sought to describe self-efficacy beliefs affecting principal leadership related to accountability. Research has uncovered a strong relationship between effective principals and successful schools (McCullers & Bozeman, 2010). Without strong, effective leadership, schools do not function optimally. As related to Bandura’s social learning theory (1977), motivation and self-efficacy go hand-in-hand. McCullers and Bozeman (2010) also found that principals’ self-efficacy beliefs were positively correlated with beliefs in the attainability of federal and state education goals such as those in NCLB. As such, experiences influence principals’ perceptions and impact self-efficacy related to school improvement. For as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) explains, factors affecting perceptions are important for eventually determining behaviors to achieve goals such as those in a school improvement plan. Considering the increased responsibility of principals to positively affect student achievement, it is important that leaders develop high levels of self-efficacy (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

Questions eight through 10 specifically encouraged principal voice culminating with a one-shot question encouraging the addition of desired information (Patton, 2015). Qualitative data exploring elementary principal experiences with school improvement gives voice to those who are directly responsible for the day-to-day management and improvement of schools. Insights into the experiences of elementary principals can potentially shape the way improvement processes, expectations, and supports are implemented streamlining accountability

structures. The problem is that the principals' voices describing experiences with school improvement efforts are largely missing in research (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014). The lack of qualitative data is due, in part, to the relative infancy of the mandated accountability shift and the primarily quantitative nature of school improvement and ultimate accountability in the context of assessment. "There are a number of areas in the new law in which implementation could benefit from the principals' voices" (Superville, 2016, p. 14).

### **Data Analysis**

By describing my background and experiences as completed in the *Role of the Researcher* section of the manuscript, personal experiences were bracketed and the focus was directed instead to participants in conjunction with transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This full description of personal experiences with school improvement was my attempt to set aside personal experience, bias, and assumptions. Bracketing clears thought and allows the phenomenon of school improvement to be looked at purely. To further assist with this process, I answered all interview questions personally prior to completing interviews. Furthermore, reflexive journaling throughout the study assisted with the epoche process (Moustakas, 1994). Reflexive journaling was completed throughout data collection and analysis.

After collecting data from interviews (one-to-one and focus group) and while analyzing documents, I used Moustakas' (1994) approach to data analysis, and ATLAS.ti qualitative software originally was chosen for analysis due to few limits on coding, the existence of hyperlinked texts, and linking of memos (Barry, 1998). However, the software was ultimately used mainly as an organizational tool for data uploads, highlighting significant statements, assigning codes, creating code groups, and using the code document table feature permitting

further sorting of codes and enumeration. It was helpful for memos to be used mainly in hand-written form to more easily connect information as needed. Each piece of data was read multiple times prior to official analysis to establish greater familiarity. First, I located statements from data sources beginning with interviews and worked to develop a highlighted list of described school improvement experiences which was not repetitive or overlapping. Different layers of open coding occurred. The first layer included significant statements. Statements were highlighted demonstrating how participants were experiencing school improvement, and horizontalization, or equal value, was assigned representing phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). This process allowed me to view each statement as having equal weight or worth (Moustakas, 1994). Each significant statement was then read again, coded based on experiential description, and also coded specifically, if possible, as a described behavioral experience, environmental experience, or personal experience permitting a more organized and comprehensive view of descriptions, working in tandem with other open codes throughout the process. As Creswell (2013), suggests, I remained “open to additional codes emerging during the analysis” (p. 185).

Next, assigned codes were grouped into larger units of information beginning with clustering horizons (Moustakas, 1994). Meaning was then further constructed through grouping of themes (Moustakas, 1994). Identified themes were also coded for groupings in Atlas.ti. This process allowed me to more meaningfully organize units of information. More phenomenological reduction followed allowing for participant described experiences to be viewed texturally in the form of “what” and structurally in the form of “how,” and all codes were finalized once experiential meaning was clear (Moustakas, 1994). To triangulate all information from interviews (one-to-one and focus group) and document analysis, a composite description

was finally developed providing synthesis, meaning, and essence of principal experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability (Moustakas, 1994).

Though essence of experience is ever-changing and evolving, this synthesis of essence reflects the vantage point of the researcher from a state of untainted awareness following comprehensive reflective study (Moustakas, 1994). For in transcendental phenomenology, the researcher must learn to “see naively and freshly again, to value conscious experience, to respect the evidence of one’s senses, and to move toward an intersubjective knowing of things, people, and everyday experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 101). Though not qualitative in design, the utilization of the PSES descriptive survey provided additional insight into participant characteristics adding context to participant experiences (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to increase the validity and reliability of this specific research study, several techniques were employed to increase trustworthiness. Trustworthiness and authenticity work cohesively to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2013). Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility refers to truth in findings, dependability addresses consistency, confirmability represents unbiased methods, and transferability increases application of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Methods used in this study to achieve trustworthiness included bracketing, triangulation, peer/expert review, rich description, reflexive journaling, data audit, and attention to maximum variation sampling.

### **Credibility**

Credibility seeks to establish that findings accurately describe reality and is dependent upon deep, rich information (Schwandt, 2015). Sufficient methods must be included to support or refute interpretations or conclusions of a study (Creswell, 2013). Credibility in this study was

established by describing personal experience with school improvement and bracketing personal experience using reflexive journaling employing epoche (Moustakas, 1994). Building trust and checking for misinformation with the focus group was also an important means of establishing credibility. These processes increased the validity of the study because I made decisions about the focus and purpose based on close, comprehensive engagement (Creswell, 2013). Data triangulation using multiple data sources including interviews (one-to-one and focus group) and document analysis also established greater credibility. A descriptive survey was used to provide context only.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

In order to establish consistency, methods and processes used to conduct the study must be dependable (Moustakas, 1994). Setting descriptions allowed for context among common elementary Title I school settings in suburban and rural environments. Rich, thick descriptions of themes, participant checks of findings and interpretations in focus groups, and reflexive journaling established greater dependability allowing a logical trace of steps (Schwandt, 2015). Products and data generated from the study were reliable (Creswell, 2013).

Similar to dependability, rich, thick descriptions of themes, direct quotes, participant checks of the findings and interpretations in focus groups, and reflexive journaling also established greater confirmability linking findings to data in visible ways (Schwandt, 2015). Confirmability is the degree to which results can be validated (Creswell, 2013). The focus group particularly allowed for a data audit or member-check minimizing bias and distortion of information (Creswell, 2013).

### **Transferability**

To generalize or transfer meaning to other settings, thick, rich descriptions of the sites and demographics of participants provided greater transferability to similar contexts (Creswell, 2013). Maximum variation sampling with attention to ethnicity, gender, setting, years of experience, and self-perceptions of efficacy also enhanced transferability increasing the possibility that what was found in one context could be applicable to another (Creswell, 2013). “To facilitate transferability, it is valuable to give a clear and distinct description of culture and context, selection and characteristics of participants, data collection and process of analysis” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 110). I attempted to provide clear descriptions of context, participant characteristics, and collection as well as analysis of data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical considerations were addressed during this study. IRB approval was obtained before gathering data, and informed consent was obtained from participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and identifiable names and were organized alphabetically and by gender in order to further protect identities and information. In addition, all electronic data collected was password-protected on a computer, backed up on a flash drive, and copies of data were maintained in a locked storage cabinet. Information collected was analyzed using password-protected ATLAS.ti qualitative software. The risks associated with participation in this study were minimal and involved no more than the participant would encounter in day-to-day life. The potential did exist, however, for me to side with participants. As a precaution, researcher experiences were bracketed using reflexive journaling throughout data collection and analysis to avoid bias (Moustakas, 1994). Data not being shared with participants can be a concern, so a focus group was convened to confirm experiences and

themes. At the conclusion of the study, participants will be debriefed on outcomes and implications of the research in exchange for participation (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. This chapter provided a description of qualitative study using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. Using this method, participants tell personal stories giving "meaning, structure, and essence of lived experiences" (Patton, 2015, p. 98). Using a descriptive survey, interviews, document analysis, and a focus group, data were collected and analyzed in a trustworthy and ethical manner. While principals describe experiences with school improvement in the newest age of accountability under NCLB and ESSA, the transcendental phenomenological method allowed me to thoroughly describe the concept of school improvement through the day-to-day experiences of principals using their own voice.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This chapter contains study results. Participant information is included along with rich descriptions in the form of participant portraits. More results follow and are organized thematically including responses to research questions. Theme development aligns with steps for data analysis, and research question responses answer questions based on collected data. The chapter concludes with a summary. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools.

### **Participants**

Participants included 12 elementary principals in northeast Georgia with three or more years of experience serving in their current Title I school. After sharing initial study information with superintendents from separate school districts in two different RESA regions (Pioneer and Northeast Georgia), potential study participants were recommended from three separate school districts, two county districts and one city district (see Appendix B). Recommended participants, elementary principals in suburban and rural Title I schools, ultimately possessed some diversity in all areas except ethnicity. There were 9 female participants and 3 males with levels of experience in the principalship varying from three and half years to 17 years. The average number of years of experience for participants was 10.2 years. All 12 participants completed descriptive surveys and individual interviews, all participants submitted three years of school improvement plans with the exception of two principals who could not locate their formal plans from 2016-2017, and six principals participated in the focus group interview. All participants

spoke of behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences associated with leading school improvement using detailed descriptions and specific experiential examples.

Though not qualitative in design, the utilization of a descriptive survey provided additional insight into participant characteristics adding context to the study (Huberman & Miles, 2002). The PSES is made of up 18 items using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (none) to 9 (a great deal) (See Appendix F). The PSES contains items associated with self-efficacy in management, instruction, and leadership (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Scores on the PSES can be as high as 162 with higher scores reflecting higher ratings of principal self-efficacy. “The PSES instrument is copyrighted by the authors, however, there are no copyright restrictions on the instrument for use in scholarly research and for non-profit educational purposes,” so no permission for use in this study is required to be obtained (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 583). A confirmatory factor analysis of the PSES conducted by Smith and Guarino (2005) reveals construct validity ( $p < .01$ ) and high goodness of fit indices (i.e.,  $> .99$ ) for both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Bentler & Bonett, 1980).

Identifying participant information was removed and alphabetized pseudonyms by gender were inserted to protect anonymity. Female participant pseudonyms were assigned based on typical gender-specific names associated with alphabet letters A – I, and male participants were labeled typical gender-specific names using letters J – K. Additional alphabet corresponding replacement pseudonyms were assigned after focus group transcription review to further protect identities. Using described experiences and analyses, participants are referred to as Ann, Beth, Chloe, Debra, Eve, Fiona, Geneva, Hope, Isabel, Jerry, Kirk, and Luke. Participants’ reported self-efficacy on the PSES varied from a few responses of three indicating

“very little” efficacious experience with certain principal leadership elements to nine indicating a “great deal” of perceived efficacy. Ann reported the highest level of self-efficacy with a score of 156 out of 162, and Kirk rated the lowest level with a score of 111 out of 162, falling between the ranges of “some degree” to “quite a bit” of self-efficacy. Participants, according to results from the PSES, generally felt least in control of “maintaining control of their own daily schedule” and most in control of “promoting school spirit among a large majority of the student population.” Participant portraits include demographic information, personal accounts of journeys to the principalship, and descriptions of rewarding and challenging components of the job.

### **Ann**

Ann, a Caucasian female, is in her fifth year leading a rural elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Ann has a passion for teaching stating that administration was “not my journey at all. Life led me to administration, hardship, income” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). As a single mother and teacher, she began taking on smaller tasks such as professional learning and master scheduling. Ann was determined to become an effective leader after serving under a marginal principal. “I worked for one administrator early on, and I knew I never wanted to be that person, and I never wanted to work for another one of those people” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Her most rewarding experiences as a principal include “allowing teachers the opportunity to teach and making certain that we can keep our focus on children” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). She does not enjoy the operational side of leadership but exudes a passion for curriculum, instruction, and children.

Ann rated herself a 156 out of 162 on the PSES indicating high self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Ann rated herself a nine or highest score on 16 of them. Her lowest rating was associated with “maintaining control of her own schedule.” She partially credited her positive leadership to a former principal mentor and current superintendent who both have allowed her to take risks.

The majority of Ann’s described school improvement experiences were related to school culture, perceived growth, and rules of the game associated with school improvement. “I’m all about knowing all the rules of the game before we start” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Ann described mostly behavioral experiences with school improvement. She described feeling strongly that it is an administrative responsibility to promote a positive school climate even in the face of school improvement challenges, indicating that the process can “absolutely break or promote morale amongst teachers” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018).

### **Beth**

Beth, a Caucasian female, is in her seventh year leading a suburban elementary school that recently added pre-kindergarten to grades kindergarten through five. Beth entered into leadership hoping to “engage teachers more and show them what [she] had learned with [her] teaching and just be more of a diagnostic, prescriptive kind of a teacher for the different subject areas” (Beth, personal communication, November 5, 2018). She sought district office assistance and enlisted their support to “open doors.” She served as an assistant principal for six years before becoming principal in the same school. Beth particularly enjoys the instructional side of leadership as she described,

I really enjoy going into the classrooms and seeing the children and the children not being, “Oh, that's the principal – Shhhhh.” You know, they love the principal and the assistant principal, and they want to hug you and be around you all the time without me having to teach the class and be so focused on the standards. I'm in the class and observing and really seeing what the students are doing. So it's just a different perspective that I really enjoy. That's my love for being a principal. And then on the other hand, being able to talk to the teachers and saying, “This isn't a gotcha but I'm going to show you if we try this.” And coming in with them and showing them how I would do it and them coming back and saying, “Oh my gosh, it's so much easier since I do that.” (Beth, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

Beth's cited leadership challenges also focus on instructional leadership stating that it is a goal to make sure teachers are “very intentional with their teaching” (Beth, personal communication, November 5, 2018). She described having difficult conversations with teachers about their teaching and her deliberate intentions to make teachers feel safe and supported. Beth used a coaching analogy to describe difficult conversations prompting improvement or change. “We all have to practice every day” (Beth, personal communication, November 5, 2018). She views her job as having the “right people in place” to get the job done. Beth feels that everyone has the ability to do their best, but they just have to be willing to put in time and effort.

Beth rated herself a 116 out of 162 on the PSES falling between the ranges of “some degree” to “quite a bit” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Beth did not rate herself a nine or highest score on any of them. Her lowest ratings, although still demonstrating moderate self-efficacy, were associated with operational components and positive cultural elements.

The majority of Beth's described school improvement experiences are related to student and staff growth, collegial collaboration, and the concept of addressing the needs of the whole child, rather than just academic components. Beth describes mostly personal experiences with school improvement. She is extremely goal-oriented and expresses dismay over repeatedly looking at scores only to discover that a goal was not met causing teachers to be "overwhelmed" and "disheartened."

### **Chloe**

Chloe, a Caucasian female, is in her eleventh year leading a rural elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Chloe's educational leadership journey did not originally begin as a teacher. She started in the banking world, went back to school, taught for seven years, and then became an assistant principal. She was an assistant principal for 12 years, working under two different principals, before becoming principal herself at her current school. Her favorite part of being principal is supporting children and staff. She describes this support taking many different forms such as listening, providing quality instruction, and sometimes social work.

Chloe also describes conversations with teachers as sometimes being very difficult. She enlists the collaborative help of her instructional coach and an additional administrator to help coach teachers to proficiency. However, she also described a specific instance when the coaching just was not enough, and the teacher was asked to reflect on whether education was her path. The teacher ultimately left the profession.

Chloe rated herself a 150 out of 162 on the PSES indicating high self-efficacy. Out

of 18 statements, Chloe rated herself a nine or highest score on 12 of them. Her lowest ratings were associated with change, vision, motivation, learning, and achievement, but even those descriptors reflected “quite a bit” of self-efficacy.

The majority of Chloe’s described school improvement experiences are related to collaboration, data, and root cause analysis in the form of school improvement planning. Chloe describes mostly behavioral experiences with school improvement. She highly values the relationships she has with other principals and often references the support and collaboration among leaders. “Yeah, I mean, we have each other on speed dial as leaders here in the county, or speed email” (Chloe, personal communication, November 6, 2018).

### **Debra**

Debra, also a Caucasian female, is similar to Beth in that she also originally started in the banking business. She is in her fifteenth year as a principal and currently leads a suburban elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. When her son started kindergarten, Debra began teaching Sunday School and “fell in love with lesson planning” (Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018). Administration was not originally a goal, but Debra moved into an assistant principal role working with discipline to then working with curriculum. It was this varied experience that paved her path to the principalship.

Working with disgruntled staff is tough for Debra as she does not “ever want to not be what others want [me] to be” ((Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018). She stated that “when a parent or teacher is upset, I don’t take it personally, but I take it seriously. That’s difficult” (Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018). Similar to others, Debra describes a passion for quality instruction, and she mentions the joy of having new teachers who are “anxious” and “eager” to learn. “The absolute most rewarding [part] is taking a novice and

turning them into a superstar and helping them along that journey” (Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018).

Again, Debra has 15 years of principal experience and rates herself a 148 out of 162 on the PSES falling between “quite a bit” and “a great deal” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Debra rates herself a nine or highest score on 11 of them. Her lowest ratings are associated with operational elements, stress, vision, culture, and student achievement.

The majority of Debra’s described school improvement experiences are related to collaboration, collegial conversations, culture, and growth. Debra articulates mostly behavioral experiences with school improvement. She relies heavily on her leadership team to lead school improvement planning and recognizes that plans can take three to five years to see results.

### **Eve**

Eve, a Caucasian female, has been principal for three and a half years and is the least experienced participant in this study. Eve serves in a suburban elementary school containing grades pre-kindergarten through grade five. Eve, like many study participants, had no original intention of becoming a principal. Eve mentioned a desire to make “an impact [in] larger terms than my classroom” (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018). She loved being a classroom teacher but noted, “As a principal, I am able to make deep connections with my students [and teachers] and be an advocate for them” (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018). She also described specifically what advocating for teachers might look like saying,

I think it's listening to them. And just with new initiatives that come down the pike. You know, listening with an open mind, and not just immediately thinking that they're whining and complaining, which sometimes it feels like that. I do think that the majority of our teachers here are so invested in the students. And when they come to me with

concerns about their perceptions of how things are going, I want them to know that I'm going to hear them out. (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

Eve struggles with adults who do not have a passion for helping others, but works hard to understand what everyone brings to the table by inspiring and encouraging others who may have different viewpoints. Eve rated herself a 134 out of 162 on the PSES falling between “quite a bit” and “a great deal” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Eve rates herself a nine or highest score on six of them. Her lowest ratings are associated with discipline and staff behavior, but even those ratings indicate “some degree” of self-efficacy

The majority of Eve’s described school improvement experiences are related to collaboration and expectations associated with school improvement planning. Eve describes mostly personal experiences with school improvement. Eve articulates anxiety felt during NCLB and accountability requirements stating, “It was tough to collaborate in those situations because...everyone was looking out for themselves because they wanted their bar to be higher than the others” (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018). Conversely, Eve sees ESSA bringing more positive change to the school improvement landscape.

### **Fiona**

Fiona, a Caucasian female, is in her eighth year leading a rural elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Fiona grew up in a household where education was always “a big part of [her] life” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). She had her children first and then went back to school to become a teacher in another state. She moved her way up in her previous school and eventually became the assistant principal and then the principal. Fiona describes her experience moving from colleague to supervisor sharing,

I love to be a part of everything that's happening in the building, not just my own little world in the classroom and just feel that everything else career-wise in our world is built upon the foundations that we create here in elementary school. There's nowhere else I'd rather be. (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

Fiona thrives on “getting kids the help that they need” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). But she also admits that sometimes principal, staff, and parent ideologies do not always align creating challenges which can be difficult to overcome but are not insurmountable.

Fiona rated herself a 138 out of 162 on the PSES falling between “quite a bit” and “a great deal” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Fiona rates herself a nine or highest score on eight of them. Her lowest ratings are associated with scheduling and prioritizing, but even those elements reflect “some degree” of self-efficacy.

The majority of Fiona’s described school improvement experiences are related to accountability, collaboration, and culture related to school improvement planning. Fiona describes mostly personal experiences with school improvement. Fiona is “protective of [her] school and [her] kids and [her] teachers” and she described receiving less than desirable school improvement results as “a whole roller coaster of emotions” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). “You’re mad, you’re sad, but then you are like, ‘Okay, it is what it is. Now we have to work as a team to address the situation’” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). Working as a team is important to Fiona to promote a continuous school improvement culture.

### **Geneva**

Geneva, a Caucasian female, is in her tenth year as an administrator leading a rural

elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Geneva did not start teaching until age 31. She began teaching middle school, left her classroom to work directly in the central office with curriculum, and eventually worked at the state level directing the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards. After teaching at the college level for a couple of years, she realized how much she missed the children and became an elementary administrator. Geneva most enjoys seeing growth of kids and faculty. She described her school's progress with closing the gap as "incremental gains, which we were very proud of, but we saw that was really the right path because now we're seeing the results" (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Geneva also described some challenges associated with leadership including sharing responsibilities and building capacity philosophizing,

My mantra for this year has been that there is joy in watching others work and not that I'm lazy, but in watching them develop into leaders and that I can sit back and watch some of that instead of having to have my finger in every pot. I think giving up that control, um, I think in learning to accept people where they are and annex and build [on] that... (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

Geneva rated herself a 152 out of 162 on the PSES indicating high self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Geneva rates herself a nine or highest score on thirteen of them. Her lowest ratings are associated with operational elements, stress management, and student achievement, but those ratings still reflect "quite a bit" of self-efficacy.

The majority of Geneva's described school improvement experiences are related to self-reflection, accountability, culture, and rules of the game associated with school improvement planning. "I don't think we pay nearly as much attention to ESSA as we did to NCLB because

there's a part of me... I think we watched that pendulum enough till, you know, well, it's going to change again" (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018). Geneva describes mostly personal experiences with school improvement and is very open about her reflections and occasional self-doubt in leading school improvement. She often asks herself if others will truly continue to follow her lead if the desired results do not reflect school improvement efforts.

### **Hope**

Hope, a Caucasian female, is in her tenth year leading a suburban elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Hope had "no intentions of being an administrator ever" (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). She has only served in one school since starting in the classroom and has taught every grade level in her tenure. She became a math coach for her current building, then assistant principal, and finally principal. Hope is in her 34<sup>th</sup> year of education. Hope feels best when she has "done something for somebody" (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). She described her ideal atmosphere stating,

At the end of the day, when the kids have a good day and they're happy going home, it's like, "Okay, I ... I feel good about being here." Because I have helped provide an atmosphere and create the expectation that, when you come here to learn, it's okay. Mistakes are okay. You know, we celebrate, we don't get bent out of shape about our mistakes, because that's where we learn the most. (Hope, personal communication, December 1, 2018)

Interestingly, Hope's most rewarding experiences as principal are also her most challenging. She describes the "constant needs of so many people" and the frustration that many times instruction takes a backseat (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

Hope rated herself a 120 out of 162 on the PSES failing between “some degree” and “quite a bit” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Hope rates herself a nine or highest score on five of them. Her lowest rating is associated with her schedule which reflects “very little” self-efficacy in this area.

The majority of Hope’s described school improvement experiences are related to rules of the school improvement game, various accountability perspectives, self-reflection, growth, and collaboration. She describes mostly personal experiences with school improvement and candidly expresses her experiences with NCLB and ESSA as the “same game, different name” (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). With ESSA, she hopes there will be more continuity in expectations stating, “Hopefully now, the target will be clear, you know, if we will just leave it alone” (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). Ultimately, Hope aims for school improvement planning to be collaborative and works to empower her leadership team. She recognizes the importance of building capacity in her school level leaders for overall student and staff growth.

### **Isabel**

Isabel, a Caucasian female, is in her tenth year leading a rural elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Isabel’s mom was a teacher and she often joined her mom on planning days and after school. Through these experiences, she “developed a love for education and teaching” (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018). As a teacher, she gradually began taking on more leadership opportunities such as leading Honors Day when “an opportunity came up to be an instructional coach” (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018). She then moved on to assistant principal where she served for four years, finally ascending to the principalship.

Like other participants, Isabel loves to see children and teachers succeed. Isabel credits her wonderful mentors with helping to model good leadership and how to handle a variety of situations. Also, as others have previously described, her articulated challenges center around difficult conversations with teachers and parents. Isabel shares,

Probably the most challenging are those tough conversations you have to have either with parents or teachers. With teachers, if it's a poor evaluation or inappropriate behaviors...

It's very rare that you have to do it, but when you do, you have to, you want to treat that person with kindness, but still get your point across about what needs to be different.

(Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018)

Isabel rated herself a 122 out of 162 falling between “quite a bit” and “a great deal” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Isabel does not rate herself a nine or highest score on any of them. Her lowest ratings are associated with her schedule and student achievement, but even those indicators represent “some degree” of self-efficacy.

The majority of Isabel’s described school improvement experiences are related to growth, professional learning, and root cause analysis in the context of school improvement planning. Isabel describes mostly personal experiences with school improvement and recognizes the importance of continuous growth for staff and students. She enjoys working to build capacity in others stating, “When you hire that first-year teacher and you see potential in them and they're green and then you get to see them 10 years later when they're a master teacher, I think that's very rewarding too” (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018). Isabel admitted to a learning curve associated with the ESSA legislation, but she is committed to her own professional learning. She credited school reform efforts at her school partially to making school improvement more manageable for staff by breaking the official SIP into more manageable parts.

**Jerry**

Jerry, a Caucasian male, is in his fifteenth year as a principal. Jerry currently leads a suburban elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Jerry never imagined becoming a principal, but opportunities were repeatedly presented leading him toward his path to principal leadership. It all began with “an opportunity to be a substitute teacher when I was 19” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018).

He “fell in love with the school environment, and the dynamics of working with kids and teachers” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Jerry enjoys “success stories and progress” and articulated particular success stories of former students. He passionately mentions that the challenges faced in education today are “probably not the same as it would have been had you asked me ten years ago” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018).

Jerry rated himself a 136 out of 162 on the PSES falling between “quite a bit” and “a great deal” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Jerry rates himself a nine or highest score on six of them. His lowest rating is associated with his schedule, and that descriptor still indicates “some degree” of self-efficacy.

The majority of Jerry’s described school improvement experiences are related to trust with accountability as it is connected to community and familial perceptions and growth in data. “I think a lot of that confidence comes if you know that the people that you're working for have confidence in you” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Jerry reflected, “I never took a class that I recall, in my undergraduate program, Master's degree, I almost have a doctoral degree...I don't think I've ever taken a class in school improvement” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Jerry described mostly personal experiences with school

improvement with many behavioral experiences sprinkled throughout. Jerry shared experiences with building trust and collaboration among colleagues to encourage growth and collaboration.

### **Kirk**

Kirk, a Caucasian male, has been a principal for ten and a half years at his current location. He leads a rural elementary school containing pre-kindergarten through grade five. Kirk also describes never really wanting to become a principal. “It was really, just out of necessity, for taking care of my family. But once I had kids and needed a little bit more money... That's really how I became an administrator” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Before entering leadership, Kirk was a teacher for 11 years. He then was an assistant principal for two and a half years before becoming a principal. He worked under a principal who “trusted [him] to do a lot, so [he] got a lot of experience” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Kirk credits relationships as the most rewarding aspect of being a principal expressing,

The most rewarding experiences are just seeing relationships being built between students and kids, and students and myself. Relationships with families, making those connections... I see it a lot more in [my current system] than I did in [my previous system]. The relationships that we have with our communities here are more necessary than I felt they were in [my previous district]. They [in my previous system] appreciated what we had with the communication and the relationships that we had, but they didn't need us. Here, these communications and the relationships that we build with our families - they really need those relationships. (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

Like some other participants, Kirk has experienced challenges associated with having difficult conversations with teachers who are not living up to their fullest potential. “If I wouldn't put my kids in your class, then you probably need to work on something” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018).

Kirk rated himself a 111 out of 162 falling between “some degree” and “quite a bit” of self-efficacy but the lowest of out all participants. Out of 18 statements, Kirk does not rate himself a nine or highest score on any of them. His lowest ratings are associated with priorities, motivation, vision, and behavior which all indicate “some degree” of self-efficacy.

The majority of Kirk's described school improvement experiences are related to rules of the school improvement game and growth. School improvement is “a game, and not that there actually is a winner and a loser, but I feel like there is, you know?” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Kirk describes mostly behavioral experiences with accountability and school improvement. He presents an incongruous relationship at times with meeting goals in school improvement plans and then “tanking” on CCRPI scores, which is Georgia's federally-approved accountability reporting tool aligned with ESSA.

## **Luke**

Luke, a Caucasian male and the most seasoned principal in the study, has been a principal for seventeen years. Luke's decision to enter administration was the result of a tragic experience. His former co-worker went into cardiac arrest, administration had set rules that no one could call 911 except leadership, and there was no administrator in the building at the time. Luke administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation by himself for 30 minutes before help arrived. He then “knew that [he] was going to go into administration because administration needed to be better” (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018). He mentions his most rewarding

experience as principal as “each year I get to sit on the stage at graduation” (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018). He emphatically mentions that his most challenging experiences as principal do not relate to CCRPI describing,

Last week I had to sit in, sit in this office with a Division of Family and Children Services worker, and a child who I had a strong relationship with, and they were taking him from his parents. Those are the things that get me. It's not the CCRPI, I tell you, it's not the bureaucracy part. It's not that stuff. (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

Luke rated himself a 136 out of 162 on the PSES falling between “quite a bit” and “a great deal” of self-efficacy. Out of 18 statements, Luke rates himself a nine or highest score on five of them. His lowest ratings are associated with operational tasks, stress, motivation, vision, change, and student learning. However, each of these descriptors still indicate “quite a bit” of self-efficacy.

The majority of Luke’s described school improvement experiences are related to rules of the school improvement game, relationships, and expectations. “We have to remember it's a one day test and that's what they're basing it on,” (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018). However, Luke’s perspective on school improvement rules is that with high expectations and good relationships, good results will follow. School improvement is not “what I lose sleep over. It’s not a test score” (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018). Luke described mostly personal experiences with school improvement and explained the lack of environmental experiences stating,

Perhaps, you know I've never had a parent ask me. Not one parent has ever asked me about our [CCRPI] score actually, and I discuss it with our governance. They know what

it is, but I've never had a parent talk to me or question what our score was. (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

## **Results**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. As stated previously, the PSES was used for descriptive purposes only in conjunction with perceptions of self-efficacy. After collecting data from interviews (one-to-one and focus group) and while analyzing documents, I used Moustakas' (1994) approach to data analysis, and ATLAS.ti software was ultimately used mainly as an organizational tool for data uploads, significant statements, codes, code groups, and code document tables. This section discusses steps and results from information analysis concluding with emerging themes and responses to research questions.

### **Theme Development**

Research questions are answered using participants' described school improvement experiences in interviews, document analysis, and a focus group session. Descriptive survey information, including results from the PSES, added context to the study. Data analysis steps used to generate themes are also described. "Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

**Epoche.** By describing my background and experiences as completed in the *Role of the Researcher* section of the manuscript, personal experiences were bracketed and the focus was directed instead to participants in conjunction with transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This full description of personal experiences with school improvement was my attempt to set aside personal experience, bias, and assumptions. Bracketing clears thought and allows the

phenomenon of school improvement to be looked at purely. To further assist with this process, I answered all interview questions personally prior to completing interviews. Furthermore, reflexive journaling throughout the study assisted with the epoche process (Moustakas, 1994).

**Descriptive survey.** After obtaining consent from each participant, the PSES descriptive survey was completed and returned to me. The descriptive survey included demographic information related to gender, setting, years of principal experience, ethnicity, and self-efficacy. Principals had the choice to complete the survey on paper or electronically. Table 3 shows the total reported self-efficacy scores for each participant ranked from highest to lowest as correlated with years of experience as principal. Ann, with five years of principal experience, ranked highest with perceived self-efficacy with a score of 156 out of 172, and Kirk with 10.5 years of principal experience, ranked himself lowest with 111 out of 172. It is interesting to note that all participants indicated moderate to high self-efficacy overall.

Table 3

*Principal PSES Score Rankings and Experience*

Pseudonym	PSES Total Score	Years of Principal Experience
Ann	156	5
Beth	152	10
Chloe	150	11
Debra	148	15
Eve	138	8
Fiona	136	15
Geneva	136	17
Hope	134	3.5
Isabel	122	10
Jerry	120	10
Kirk	116	7
Luke	111	10.5

**Interview.** Each participant participated in a one-to-one semi-structured interview providing the main source of data for the study. Interviews ranged from approximately 35 to 60 minutes long. All interviews took place in the participants' schools in a location of their choice to ensure comfort and confidentiality. I also felt comfortable in these settings as I tend to feel

more at home in a school rather than a district or regional office setting. After participant consent was officially obtained (see Appendix E), I audio recorded the interviews using two devices. Upon completion of the interview, the file was stored in a password protected file on my computer. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, reflexive journaling was employed to bracket possible bias, and during individual interviews, I had a sheet to jot down notes and observations. I really struggled at times with just listening, but this note-taking helped me stay focused. Audio files were sent to a transcription service. Each participant then received a transcription of their interview to ensure accuracy and promote trust. Only one participant made a change to his interview indicating that he wanted to provide more clarity with one of his responses.

**Document analysis.** Participants were asked to electronically submit their most recent school improvement plans. Plans from 2016 – 2017, 2017 – 2018, and 2018 – 2019 were submitted by all participants except two who could not locate their plans from 2016 – 2017 totaling 34 submitted school improvement plans. Because school improvement plans are required to be completed electronically, I was able to also import them into the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti for organization and analysis. Interestingly, plans were structured and formatted differently, based on the district, but most required the same basic elements.

**Focus group.** As informed consent was already obtained for participants, the focus group served as a means to clarify understandings, meaning, and build trust (Stewart & Williams, 2005). As such, a video-taped online discussion among six participating principals, half of the sample size, took place via Google ZOOM. One participant was male, and the five remaining participants were female. The session included standardized, semi-structured prompts stated verbally and visually using PowerPoint to provide a system of checks and balances to

weed out extremes (Patton, 2015). I was somewhat disappointed that more of the principals were unable to participate, but I also understood they were very busy. I tried to employ ample wait time, and discussion was video recorded by using the Google ZOOM recording feature. Transcription was completed using a transcriptionist. Participants were given the opportunity review a transcript afterwards for accuracy. Focus groups are unique in that there are multiple participants, so protection of identity and information is not guaranteed. As such, when the completed transcription was reviewed by participants, another layer of anonymity using different but still alphabetized, gender-specific synonyms were ultimately added before final, comprehensive reporting in the manuscript.

**Horizontalization and clustering horizons.** Statements were then located from data sources beginning with interviews, and I strived to develop a highlighted list of described school improvement experiences which was not repetitive or overlapping. Different layers of open coding occurred. The first layer included significant statements. Statements were highlighted demonstrating how participants were experiencing school improvement, and horizontalization, or equal value, was assigned representing phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). This process allowed me to view each statement as having equal weight or worth (Moustakas, 1994). Each significant statement was then also coded specifically, if possible, as a described behavioral experience, environmental experience, or personal experience permitting a more organized and comprehensive view of experiential descriptions. As Creswell (2013), suggests, I remained “open to additional codes emerging during the analysis” (p. 185). Next, codes were grouped into larger units of information, if possible, beginning with clustering horizons (Moustakas, 1994).

**Grouping of themes.** Meaning was then further constructed through grouping of themes (Moustakas, 1994). Identified themes were also coded for groupings in Atlas.ti. This process

allowed me to meaningfully organize units of information and cross check for clarity. More phenomenological reduction followed allowing for descriptions of experience to be viewed texturally in the form of “what” and structurally in the form of “how,” and all codes were finalized once experiential meaning was clear (Moustakas, 1994). To triangulate all information from interviews (one-to-one and focus group) and document analysis, a composite description was finally developed providing synthesis, meaning, and essence of principal experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability (Moustakas, 1994). Surfacing themes were as follows: (a) continuous improvement cultures, (b) strategy does not always align with results, (c) support is critical, and (d) progress monitoring helps achieve goals (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4

*Themes and Codes from Significant Statements and Data Sources*

Code	Significant Statement	Data Source
CIC	Continuous improvement cultures	INT/FG/DA
SR	Strategy does not always align with results	INT/FG
SC	Support is critical	INT/FG/DA
PM	Progress monitoring helps achieve goals	INT/FG/DA

Table 5

*Open Codes, Frequency, and Themes*

Open Code	Frequency	Theme
Expectation	77	
Community & Family Engagement	50	Continuous improvement cultures
Change	23	
Trust	18	
Risks	14	
Rules of Game	58	
Accountability	48	
Root Cause Analysis/SIP	47	Strategy does not always align with results
Standards/Instruction	44	
Vision	23	
Resources	19	
Collaboration	83	
Professional Learning	62	
Building Capacity	41	
Collegial Conversation	41	
Relationships	33	Support is critical
Whole Child	33	
Coaching	24	
Feedback	12	
Listening	12	
Growth	74	
Data	51	
Assessment	36	Progress monitoring helps achieve goals
Self-Reflection	35	
Subgroups	28	

***Continuous improvement cultures.*** Findings overwhelmingly indicated that all participants described the critical need for the established existence of continuous improvement cultures in their schools. Principals repeatedly described elements of expectation, trust, risk-taking, and engagement with stakeholders in their attempts to create more successful schools and

continuous improvement cultures through change. Culture, as a broad concept, can be considered ambiguous and enigmatic at times, but in the context of school improvement, participants were clear. Principals' voices, through their descriptions, all attempted to shed light on elements of importance to the creation and sustenance of continuous improvement cultures. Each described experiential elements (change, expectation, trust, risk-taking, and engagement) connecting to other behavioral, environmental, and personal factors, but the concept of improvement cultures explains to a greater extent how all factors consistently interact resulting in either crafting positive continuous improvement cultures conducive to high levels of success or creating negative cultures ultimately extinguishing motivation and decreasing productivity.

As a leader, Beth sees her role as that of a promoter of positive improvement culture. She wants her teachers to know, "We're in this fight together" (Beth, personal communication, November 5, 2018). She often brings her staff together to work on and understand school improvement processes such as the new, increased emphasis under ESSA on the whole child and to celebrate the good things that are happening. Beth discussed the importance of trust to the process explaining,

Well, I think school improvement, number one, is all about trust. So you have your leadership team together having those open conversations, whatever you think is important. Let's put it all out on the table and we're going to talk about it. It's not a one-shot deal. It's all about trusting each other and working together. You can't have somebody on the team that's not going to say anything and then go back into the masses and start saying negative things. You've got to make sure that when we walk out of this room, we're all on the same page, and we're all going to stand together. (Beth, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

Geneva also elaborated on what she felt produced a continuous improvement culture when she explained, “I think that we need to have more time that we spend together trusting each other with our information, laying it out on the table and figuring out why we need to be working on that” (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018). On a different but similar note, Eve described the trust she wanted her staff to have in her as their leader and felt that boldness and preparedness were essential to promote continuous improvement cultures from a leadership perspective conveying,

It's a struggle because I know I've worked for many principals. And I know that I don't want to sit in a faculty meeting with someone who's leading and that seems unsure about things. I want to sit in a faculty meeting, or I want to sit in a PLC with an administrator who I know is on top of what's happening, who is coming in with a confident plan, who is willing to address the elephant in the room. And, you know, just coming up with next steps. And I want to be that person. (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

Jerry also felt strongly that leaders must seek out other leaders to create a trusting culture for sustainable school improvement. “We need to make it okay that we're going to talk together, we're going to learn from each other, ...especially through things that we have in common. If it's a common template, or common goals, ‘What are you doing?’” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018).

In fact, family and community engagement, although required under both NCLB and ESSA, has taken on new meaning under the new law. The format of SIPs reflect that and require different levels of reflection in the needs assessment with the involvement of stakeholders. It is no longer acceptable to create a parent involvement plan that sits on the shelf with good intentions. Family and community members, as stakeholders, are encouraged to be a part of the

school improvement planning process deepening and widening the connection to a more positive and diverse continuous improvement culture. This concept was supported not only in document analyses but also in interviews.

Fiona, in relation to her SIP asked, “How can parents play a bigger role in being in the school more often?” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). Isabel described success with families and communities playing a bigger role in continuous improvement cultures in the context of her college and career magnet school emphasizing engagement. “Better engagement. Engagement is higher. Better community relationships. Not that they were bad before, but they're just really strong now. And then just the relationships with our kids and basically zero discipline. I mean just very minimal” (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018).

Luke also made an interesting observation related to family and community engagement in relation to school improvement and public perception. He described parent visits to his school and their reactions to what they see in relation to quality versus what they hear in the media stating,

I'm not sure the public really cares anymore. You know, we're a magnet school and a Title I school. I have parents that will come to visit us, that want to be here and they'll say, “You know, what we see score wise is not what we hear in the community about your school.” And then after they toured the school, they're like, you know, they get it. They really see what we're about. And then they bring their kids here. You know? So, it's not necessarily about that score...I think they may be kind of over it to be honest. As long as they know their kids are being taken care of, their kids are performing, you know they really don't care...Perhaps, you know I've never had a parent ask me. Not one parent

[has] ever asked me about our score actually, and I discuss it with our governance. They know what it is, but I've never had a parent talk to me or question what our score was.

(Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

Hope also described viewing herself as instrumental to the process of creating a positive continuous improvement culture by establishing clear expectations. “I have helped provide an atmosphere and create the expectation that, when you come here, [you come] to learn...” (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). Kirk, probably the most vocal in relation to expectations and their contribution to continuous school improvement culture, also described his role in setting expectations for performance stating, “I try my best to really lead by saying, ‘There's nothing I won't do,’ so I won't ask them to do anything I wouldn't do. So I try to show that- that I'll do it.” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018). He also explained the need for high expectations describing,

We can put [up] the school improvement plan and say, “We're going to do this and kind of move towards it.” And by setting high expectations, usually we're not going to meet all of them, but we'll come closer by setting them a little bit higher, and so I can feel confident in that, that we're going to lead them. (Kirk, personal communication, November 1, 2018)

Change, therefore, in a meaningful and lasting way requires a continuous improvement culture, and Ann explained her experience, “I've always had a tremendous sense that I could impact change. I have always had a tremendous sense of the right thing is the right thing” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Additionally, Debra described efforts to create a positive continuous improvement culture at her current school when she first entered the principalship sharing,

There were a lot of cultural things [and] practices that just weren't good practices and coming in and making those changes, I couldn't just look at the academics. I also had to look at the feel. The principal before me had a high school background and it was very cold. There was no artwork and it was very sterile. I wanted, when I came in, I wanted this to be a fun and happy place. I wanted kids to not be able to wait to be able to get to school. So we put things in place. (Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018)

Positive continuous improvement cultures breed positivity. Success breeds success.

Each principal described elements contributing to continuous improvement cultures where positive change, high expectations, trust, risk-taking, or engaging with families and communities assisted with the development of school cultures conducive to higher levels of school improvement success. Expectations for the remainder of the year were also discussed in the focus group solidifying findings in individual interviews and document analyses.

*Strategy does not always align with results.* It certainly came as no surprise that document analysis revealed some element of behavioral strategy associated with school improvement experiences due to the nature of Title I school improvement planning itself. However, all principals also described in interviews and the focus group a variety of employed strategies which did not always produce desired results, even though most formal plans do require an element of implementation evaluation and impact. Many participants also spoke to understanding the need for accountability but could not specifically articulate what it should look like other than growth and higher expectation, further supporting this lack of alignment. While school improvement has been around for decades, the level of strategy employed to “crack the code” has been taken to new heights under NCLB and ESSA. In fact, an open code was titled “rules of game” due to the repeated mention of “being put on a list” or “changing rules” or

explicit reference to gaming itself. For example, Hope candidly expressed her experiences with NCLB and ESSA as the “same game, different name” (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). With ESSA, she hopes there will be more consistency in accountability stating, “Hopefully now, the target will be clear, you know, if we will just leave it alone” (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018). She goes on to explain her experiences with school improvement strategy under both laws stating,

You know, school improvement plan, Title 1 plan, a lot of that keeps evolving, but at the same time, the premise to me is the same. It was always about, “What do you need to do for the next year to be better than the last year?” And, I don't know that, in my mind, anything's changed other than that I really think I've...every year [I] learn something new, so every year [I] feel like [I] get better at helping the staff create a better plan. (Hope, personal communication, December 13, 2018)

While some of the frustration associated with NCLB and the unattainable 100% proficiency requirements has been diminished, new levels of strategy using appropriate tools related to root causes, resource allocation, and accountability in general have been employed. Chloe expressed,

You know, [under NCLB] we would start the year trying to support [students], making sure that we were meeting their needs and looking at their deficits and what they needed to do so, but honestly, at that time too, we didn't have the tools that we have now, and so we were going in a lot of times sort of blind because the teachers were using their grades, and, uh, I don't know if that is often an accurate reflection, especially if you're not working together as a grade level on what that looks like, so I think we're in such a better place now. (Chloe, personal communication, November 6, 2018)

However, all participant descriptions indicated a misalignment at times between school improvement plan goals and formal accountability reports such as Georgia's redesigned CCRPI. While CCRPI itself has been in existence since 2013, it is important to note that calculations for different components of CCRPI have changed annually since its inception making it a moving target. Newly released in 2018, the redesigned CCRPI is Georgia's official accountability platform federally approved in January 2018. Also of note, redesigned CCRPI results were sent officially to principals about two weeks prior to the start of data collection for this study. Kirk further described lack of alignment between his school improvement plan and published results in the CCRPI lamenting,

And we met our goals for our school improvement plan, but then our CCRPI test score kind of tanked it down. So, you know, I guess that's kind of the worst thing, you know? So I guess, you know, when you look at your school improvement plan versus your CCRPI score, I guess it's a difference. (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

Ann also described hurt feelings associated with an unexpected drop in school climate stars on CCRPI. This surprise prompted much research to discover why so that it hopefully would not happen again. Ann feels personally responsible as a leader to help implement the right strategy to produce results. She said,

I [was] hurt when the school climate stars dropped one time. Our score went up, the finite number went up, but the number of stars dropped. I was on the phone with [district office] for a really long time trying to figure that out. Things like that I do take personally because school culture, this desk, has a lot to do with the perception of the energy in this building. It starts here. I took that one very personally. We are a five-star school again. It

could be next time, we're not. I do take this to heart that if we missed a point or we missed out on something, "Was I asleep at the wheel? Did I not ask the right question?"

(Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

Additionally, Fiona expressed how strategy does not always directly align with immediate results suggesting that experience has made it easier to digest as a leader. She described a lack of confidence in her vision and direction at times, questioning adequate attention to certain areas and a possible lack of resources if strategy alignment is not promptly achieved describing,

I would say you're never 100% confident when you're leading improvement processes because your goal is to really determine what the root of the problem is and do something to address it, but you always run the risk of, "Are we giving enough attention to the right thing? Are we giving enough... are we giving too much attention to the wrong thing?" Sometimes you feel personally responsible for the results that you're getting, and I think that as a principal, I sometimes wrestle with, "Did I not give them the resources they need? What could I have done differently in this process to make the outcome different?" But I think that through experience, you do become a little bit better at, "Okay let's focus on this problem, let's try to fix it. If we fix it, great. If not, guess what? We've got other areas that we can work on to try to address the situation." So I think that as you gain experience, you don't become so bogged down in that quick fix because it's not always a quick fix. (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

Geneva, a confident and experienced leader, with multiple levels of leadership experience at the local, district, and state levels also described a lack of strategic alignment producing moments of self-doubt stating,

You think you've got the right thing, you've convinced teachers, you've led them down this way and you've done what? Every book you read, everybody... This is the way you need to do it and then these test scores come back and you go, "How do you get them to go with you further?" and so you lose your confidence, you lose your confidence in yourself as a leader. You lose yourself, your confidence in yourself as an instructional leader. (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Not getting desired results after perceived strategic alignment is disappointing, and school leaders are required to look at each component and develop a new plan to address concerns. Most principals, having experienced strategic misalignment, described instances of moving on and up and persevering in the face of adversity after strategies did not align with desired results. Debra, in the focus group, bravely illustrated her feelings after receiving results from the redesigned CCRPI just this fall describing,

I feel that way here at my school. When our latest CCRPI scores came out, I just wanted to collapse. I was like, "I don't know what else to do." I think we're doing every single thing known to man, to get students to achieve and grow, but after about a month of lamenting, then my leadership team and I, we were able to come back to the table and say, "Okay, so we didn't do as well as we thought we were going to do. Why didn't we?" So, it did create great opportunity for us to come back to the table and reexamine the practices we were using and could improve, and where we were going to improve and how we were going to improve. (Debra, personal communication, December 17, 2018)

Even Luke, the most senior of leaders in this study, expressed realizing the need to persevere when desired results were eluded and tried to refocus on the students so that perspectives were aligned when strategies had not.

I've had good experiences, and even when we've had quoted bad score types, they've always turned into a good experience. I have no problem whatsoever with being held accountable. I just, I think what people forget is we're not producing a product. We're dealing with human beings, and those human beings change every single day and every single year. (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Jerry, a fifteen year veteran principal, described enjoying some success stories and goal attainment associated with school improvement planning, but he also passionately mentioned that the challenges faced in education today are “probably not the same as it would have been had you asked me ten years ago.” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018) Jerry states,

So, the greatest challenge that I face, I think, is to keep a vision of moving forward, and producing the success for kids, in an environment where you have so many moving pieces. And, sometimes so many agendas, whether it's that of parents, that of teachers, that of students, that of district office folks... There's a lot of different pieces moving, and this is not a huge school, there are schools that are bigger. And trying to cast a vision, and then keep it moving in that direction without getting bogged down in the minutiae of whether it be a report that's due here, or it be a student who's melting down there, that's the day-to-day stuff, that's the minutiae. (Jerry, personal communication, December 1, 2018)

Findings supporting the strategic misalignment theme indicating that while strategy does not always align with results and principal self-efficacy can temporarily be diminished as a result, there is the need to rely on other support systems during those experiences in order to

persevere in the face of adversity, more properly balancing factors in the triad of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978).

*Support is critical.* Support structures related to school improvement looked different school to school and from SIP to SIP, but all principals described the need for support in different forms of settings and contexts in interviews and the focus group. Most expressed professional learning in the context of district and/or building level professional learning communities (PLC) as a support mechanism to promote coaching, capacity building, relationships, and/or collegial conversation related to school improvement in interviews as well. All participants had professional learning elements or PLCs included in their SIPs aligned to the work of stated goals and objectives. Geneva, for example, attempted to build capacity in her 2016-2017 SIP and stated an intention to share leadership in PLCs enlisting the help of system leaders, while Debra also verbally expressed value in district support voicing,

I really like, and I don't know if this has anything to do with going from NCLB to ESSA, but I feel like our district now sees what each individual school sees, and the district's improvement is my improvement, and we're all in this together. What are we going to do different and working in that direction? It forced it, because you know, you write your [new] school improvement plan way before you ever get results of the school improvement plan you had written before. Once we got those scores, we started disaggregating the data and going back and saying to ourselves, assessing, "Did we pick the right goals?" and we most certainly, definitely did. I liked the alignment of here's what we picked, this is what we said we needed to improve in, and we're really truly working to improve that together. Some stuff individually but a lot of it together, as a district. (Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018)

Chloe, in the focus group, also clearly articulated how appreciative she was of the support received from her district and described instances of biannual meetings with district staff including executive staff and directors, when supportive feedback was provided related to action steps making the “SIP come alive in the school” (Chloe, personal communication, December 17, 2018). She also solicited district help in developing a focus area for specific school improvement, common book studies, and support in completing “instructional rounds” in classrooms to articulate evidence of a chosen focus area. Data, she proposed, were then shared with leaders and staff promoting growth. “So from those instructional rounds, we also change our professional learning plan and gear it towards what we have seen that we need to work on” (Chloe, personal communication, December 17, 2018).

Additionally, Eve further illustrated that support is critical when she continued to describe ESSA bringing more positive change to the school improvement landscape in the form of staff support sharing,

I think [ESSA has] given a little more credence to the fact that we've got to work collaboratively. It [has] helped confirm the need for professional learning communities, and regular data analysis. Just much more clearly defined goals about what we're working towards, in addition to repeatedly underscoring the importance of collaboration among teachers. (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

Eve also described a supportive process of working with her leadership team to develop the school improvement plan itself where “there are voices from every area contributing and people at every grade level who are able to articulate what our vision is” (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018). As a result, she feels that “the majority of our staff

understands what our goals are and what we plan to do to get there” (Eve, personal communication, November 5, 2018).

Like Debra who mentioned district support, Eve also mentioned principals and working relationships in the form of district support. Eve says,

I think that, as principals, we are having to, for lack of a better term “get over ourselves, and learn from each other.” Look at who's having success with certain demographics, and ask questions about, “What are you doing? How are you making this happen?”... We just have to learn from each other. (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

After the most recent redesigned CCRPI results were released, focus group participants Ann and Chloe, who interestingly participated in the group collaboratively due to their schools engaging in some PLC time together that day, described “stages of grief” upon hearing their initial results. “I actually went through those stages of grief and was like, ‘Oh no, that can’t be right, so I’ll call the people in charge. The math is wrong.’ and it was correct” (Ann, personal communication, December 17, 2018). “Agreed. This is Chloe. Ditto to what Ann said. It was very disheartening” (Chloe, personal communication, December 17, 2018). Both Ann and Chloe also expressed principals supporting each other in their district with school improvement. Chloe shared that principals “have each other on speed dial as leaders here in the county, you know, or speed email” (Chloe, personal communication, November 6, 2018). Chloe went on to describe even more critical collegial support during the focus group. “Yeah. We cry together, we laugh together...” (Chloe, personal communication, December 17, 2018).

Fiona also eloquently described a need for district and principal support in the form of sharing ideas to promote growth announcing,

Let's share what everyone's been doing. I feel like we don't have enough of that going on. I think it would be very helpful to have that dialogue and to maybe have our information collected in a way that wasn't threatening or pointing fingers, but looking at each school's areas and who's doing well in this area and why and really sharing that information so that we're helping all of us grow. (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018)

Further substantiating the need for support in school improvement, Isabel also agreed with the notion of sharing ideas for optimal growth believing,

If I keep searching I usually can figure something out and one thing that I've learned from mentors is you surround yourself with amazing people that have the strengths that you may not have and so [my assistant principal] has been very key to a lot of the improvements that we've made. (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018).

Kirk described school improvement support as based on relationships. Kirk passionately expressed the need for more “whole child” support in school improvement and progress saying, I still think the biggest thing, at least in elementary school, is you've got to make sure that you're building relationships. All this whole [school improvement] thing is great. And I think I like the fact that it shows progress and progress amongst yourself, and that kind of stuff. But it doesn't have a social-emotional component to it, and that's the biggest need that our school has now, is the social-emotional health of our kids. And if they're not socially-emotionally healthy, it doesn't matter... We're not going to get there. (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

Jerry also expressed in the focus group the need for additional supports related to social-emotional components pleading,

If we're bending the ear of legislators who help fund our schools, I believe that there is a growing need for supporting students who have emotional baggage that often gets buried. So if the legislators knew this was a need, and could come up with the additional funding to finance community resources and agencies and that kind of thing, that would be supportive. (Jerry, personal communication, December 17, 2018)

Similarly, Isabel also described her school and their attempts to support students emotionally through relationships and better engagement indicating a decision to become a magnet school for talent and career awareness four years ago. She shares,

I think it was a great decision. It takes a lot of effort to become a magnet school, but I think the overall benefit for the whole child [is better]...We were very strong in competency and, you know, very focused on test scores and that sort of thing, but I think we didn't have as many supports for students as we should. (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018)

Findings indicate that support is critical to reform efforts, for lasting change does not happen if mechanisms are not in place to sustain those changes. In moving from NCLB to ESSA, and in considering ESSA's increased focus on the whole child according to required planning templates and needs assessments studied during document analyses, principal voices described experiences with a plethora of supports for successful continuous improvement. Experiences indicated that without access to a variety of supports such as building capacity, coaching, collaboration, collegial conversation, listening, relationships, whole child concepts, feedback, and professional learning, principals are forced to rely on limited means minimizing potential success with reform.

*Progress monitoring helps achieve goals.* While interviews and focus group information described experiences reflecting that support is critical and that misalignment can sometimes occur between strategy and results, findings also suggest that regular progress monitoring does help achieve school improvement goals in a continuous improvement culture. Participants described many experiences with progress monitoring in their attempts to achieve goals related to greater gains. While the term “student achievement” has been a buzz word in educational circles for decades, the term has taken on new meaning with the movement from NCLB to ESSA. Principal experiences with progress monitoring for improvement are described in the context of varied assessments, growth as measured through regular data analysis and reflection, as well as in reflections on subgroup performance. The increased emphasis on growth under Georgia’s redesigned CCPRI mandates that principals look at not only subgroup and whole school performance but also individual growth between proficiency levels of students, staff, and themselves. For example, Fiona, in her interview, indicated that “the progress piece is where we need to start focusing” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). Additionally, Beth described her personal experiences with school improvement as she is extremely goal-oriented, expressing dismay over repeatedly looking at scores only to discover that a goal was not met. Beth shared,

I think school improvement plans need to be this global piece for the year and not just a quarterly piece. But how do we know we're even getting there? How do we know we're even near where we need to be? So just like they say, you know, “We're going to cut down on assessments.” But then how do you know students are prepared? It's kind of shooting yourself in the foot. If I don't realize where I am, I won't know where I am. So I've got to keep going back and looking and paying attention to what the scores look like,

how the students are progressing. And how about my teachers, are they getting better?

(Beth, personal communications, November 5, 2018)

Chloe clearly articulated what methods staff used at her school to more effectively monitor progress, and she emphasized that intervention had to be “immediate” based on prescribed needs of students stating,

But typically what we do is after the Measures of Academic Progress scores, the teachers, we have a PLC on that and talk about the data, what our next steps are in third, fourth, and fifth grade. Then we will start talking about what the predictors are for the [Georgia] Milestones, and then even today, we're going to talk about how it's pretty close, so once you start seeing that, you really need to understand that if these children aren't predicted to be proficient, we can't start in January doing something. It needs to be immediate. (Chloe, personal communication, November 6, 2018)

Like others, Isabel enjoys a challenge and has found that the last couple of years have forced her to grow. “I think when you always have success, you're less likely to want to challenge yourself and change...I feel like this year and last year, I've been a better principal than I've ever been” (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018). Isabel described attempts to make school improvement more manageable so that even at the classroom level, teachers can own goals and progress monitor them saying,

This is the process that we've developed here. You start out in the summer or in the spring examining your data and that includes your external, internal, and then that's when you go ahead and do that comprehensive needs assessment and your root cause analysis. And then from there you develop a school improvement plan that is simple in format... You need something simple that you can show to teachers during pre-planning,

‘These are our goals. Here we go,’ and then each grade level [sets] up a short-term action plan and they just get a little digital template. In first grade, how are we going to improve student literacy skills and make the growth that we want to make, um, in our goals? And, in second grade, how do we want to improve math achievement and have a three to five percent increase or, or whatever? That gives them that chance to kind of process it and have some accountability. We have a data room and I put some pictures in there and that's, you know, kind of where they post results that relate to the school improvement plan, the five goals and how they're addressing those five goals at the grade level. (Isabel, personal communication, December 19, 2018)

In an effort to make ongoing progress monitoring more palatable, Kirk viewed progress monitoring to achieve goals as a challenge. “Yeah. I mean, it's a score that you have and if you understand the components to it, you can kind of figure out what you need to do” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Similarly, Jerry, who loves “success stories and progress,” described the movement from NCLB to ESSA as being even more focused on data so therefore, progress monitoring to achieve goals has become even more critical to educational accountability surmising,

Again, I know that NCLB forced us to disaggregate the data, we're still disaggregating the data. NCLB put in place a high level of testing and assessment for the purpose of accountability, and quite frankly, we're still in an environment of high stakes tests, and in fact that's increasing or at least trying...There's a move to that accountability piece, as you know, to merit pay, to certificate renewal, so really the high stakes pieces probably increased even more. (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018)

But what about subgroups and progress monitoring to achieve goals with specific populations? Jerry continued to explain that NCLB made him become even more cognizant of subgroup performance and the need to progress monitor performance. “In God we trust. All else bring data” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Jerry also insightfully acknowledged that while NCLB had subgroup performance requirements and ESSA does as well, the difference he saw was that ESSA no longer allowed schools to look at just the group. In order to meet the needs of the individual student, each student within the group must be viewed from a whole child perspective. Likewise, Luke also described the need to drill down to the individual student to personalize learning and set reasonable goals for achievement.

I look at individuals. I want to know, I want to be able to walk into class and you tell me exactly where Billy is or you tell me where Sally is or why or whatever. Whoever it is.

And that's what I want to know. (Luke, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

Ann further supported the notion that progress monitoring helped achieve goals. “It’s a growth mindset...It’s very challenging, but it makes you know the children way more intimately” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). In the focus group, Ann also described a specific example of how progress monitoring is making a difference in her school in relation to student achievement sharing,

We spent a quarter of the day for release time last Friday reviewing our mid-year data and coming up with a plan to restructure our extended learning time based on data. So we looked at kindergarten and first grade as a grade band, two and three, and four and five, and we're changing the actual instruction in the classes that we're offering during extended learning. (Ann, personal communication, December 17, 2018)

Progress monitoring helps achieve goals as goals are revisited more regularly, levels of success reviewed, and plans are executed with greater precision contributing to higher levels of self-efficacy. In moving from NCLB to ESSA, and in considering ESSA's increased focus on individual student progress, it is no surprise that document analyses also revealed required progress monitoring elements to evaluate intervention effectiveness. How often this effectiveness is revisited is still unique to each school. Ongoing assessment, growth, data, regular reflection, and attention to individual and group performance contribute to clearer goal setting, regular progress monitoring, and greater achievement as described by principals in their experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability.

### **Central Research Question**

The Central Research Question guided the study focus: How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe their experiences with school improvement? I chose to make this the focus of my research as it would describe on a higher level how described factors interacted to shape experiences with school improvement.

While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering the central research question: continuous improvement cultures. Changes in expectations, trust, risk-taking, and engagement with students and stakeholders contribute to continuous improvement cultures principals described as necessary for change and balance, ultimately leading to more efficacious and more successful school improvement experiences. These elements came up in every interview, the focus group, and document analyses, and principals' voices in this study all attempted to shed light on elements of importance to culture. Again, Geneva summarized what she felt should occur as part of a continuous improvement culture when she posited, "I think we need to have more time we spend together trusting each other with our information, laying it out on the table,

and figuring out why we need to be working on that when we can work together” (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018). Each of these described elements can find connections large and small to the triad of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors, but also help explain to a greater extent how all factors consistently interact resulting in either creating positive continuous improvement cultures conducive to high levels of success or crafting negative cultures extinguishing motivation and decreasing productivity. Each participant serves in a different school with a different background, but experiences seemed to merge and manifest themselves similarly underscoring the importance of creating continuous improvement cultures in the age of educational accountability. All principals embraced some form of accountability and took their roles seriously in leading school improvement initiatives, but also recognized the importance of establishing continuous improvement cultures through managing change, expectation, trust, risk, and engagement with students and stakeholders. Jerry observed, “If you’re going to put my head on the chopping block, let me make the decision. But if [principals] are smart, [they] will make their decision after [they’ve] heard from people who know stuff” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018).

Through described experiences, principals are obviously important agents of creating, establishing, and maintaining cultures promoting behavioral strategies, environmental supports, and personal achievements associated with school improvement. Principals are also primarily learning through behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences as explained by reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 2001). Reciprocal determinism includes the opportunity for people to achieve positive results in the quest of continuous school improvement and the interactions of reciprocal determinants, or uncover limitations in the context of reciprocal determinants. Creating positive school cultures with high expectations requires greater balance associated with

personal, behavioral, and environmental factors ensuring greater likelihood of success due to more efficacious experience.

### **Sub-Question One**

Sub-Question One asked, “How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe behavioral experiences with school improvement?” While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering sub-question one: strategy does not always align with results. Behavioral experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect changes in levels of success, changes in productivity, and changes in a variety of self-evaluation methods (Bandura, 1978). Connected with behavioral experiences are state standards and evaluation systems which typically hold principals accountable for developing leadership capacity in others to manage school improvement, but the continued focus of accountability systems is centered on the knowledge and skill vested in the role of the principal (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). Findings in this area generated purposeful thinking about the benefits of reviewing what works when leading school improvement (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016).

In an effort to find what works, however, study results indicated a behavioral theme of principals describing experiences with how strategy does not always align with results. “I feel like I’m on a roller coaster ride, so I’d love to see us maintain at least a high score and continue to go up...” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Debra also described, “I just worry if we’re doing the right work because you never really know if it’s the right work until you see the results” (Debra, personal communication, November 8, 2018). While some of the frustration associated with NCLB and the unattainable 100% proficiency requirements has been diminished under ESSA as described by participants, new levels of strategy using appropriate

tools related to root causes, sensible resource allocation, and more manageable accountability in general have been employed. “We’ve got so many resources now in our system and in our school that we really need to be reaching these children, and there should be absolutely no excuse...” (Chloe, personal communication, November 6, 2018).

Again, it is certainly came as no surprise that document analysis revealed elements of behavioral strategies associated with school improvement due to the nature of Title I school improvement planning itself, but principals also described in interviews and the focus group a variety of employed strategies which did not always produce desired results even though most formal plans required an element of implementation evaluation and impact. For example, Jerry, in the focus group, lamented over the lack of alignment between strategy and results. He proposed that school improvement is similar to the game “Whack-A-Mole. I feel that you whack it, then you get it back, and then another one pops up. It's an ongoing process of looking at data and seeing results. If you're not, figuring out reasons why you are not” (Jerry, personal communication, November 1, 2018).

### **Sub-Question Two**

Sub-Question Two asked, “How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe environmental experiences with school improvement?” While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering sub-question two: support is critical. Environmental experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect social and physical components (Bandura, 1978). Application in practice or environment becomes increasingly important in light of the recent legislative shift to ESSA. This question aimed at understanding effective and efficient support structure experiences helping to facilitate a seamless shift so that schools can be optimally

successful. Even Kirk described, “They [district office] always ask how they can help, but [it] doesn’t seem like there’s follow through with the help. Not that it’s their fault. Maybe they lack money or maybe it’s just [process]...” (Kirk, personal communication, November 5, 2018). The role of district leadership, as an intermediary between federal and state mandates and schools, is perhaps more important than ever (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016).

Study results corroborated the notion that support is critical to school improvement. Environmentally, support structures related to school improvement looked different school to school and from required SIP to SIP, but all principals described through articulated experience the need for school improvement support in different settings and contexts in interviews, the focus group, and document analysis. Most expressed professional learning in the context of district and/or building level professional learning communities (PLC) as a support mechanism to promote coaching through feedback, capacity building, relationships, and collegial conversation related to school improvement. For example, Chloe, in the focus group, alluded to “instructional rounds’ with the help of district leaders and how those impacted staff professional learning saying, “And so from those instructional rounds, we also change our professional learning plan and gear it towards what we have seen that we need to work on” (Chloe, personal communication, December 17, 2018). Eve also emphasized the power of collegial support and collaboration to the school improvement process stating, “The majority of our staff understands what our goals are, and what we plan to do to get there” (Eve, personal communication, November 12, 2018). Additional supportive elements were described including listening to build relationships and attending to the whole child. Fiona referred specifically to a bench in her office as the “counseling bench” where she welcomes others to share their “struggles.” Fiona shared that school improvement includes “getting the kids the help they need – whether that be

an educational need or something in their home environment” (Fiona, personal communication, November 12, 2018). Geneva also described support structures in her school sharing that her leadership team is always willing to volunteer to take on additional tasks and responsibilities to assist with improvement efforts. She goes on to further illustrate the concept of comprehensive support saying, “We are divided into houses and our houses are divided into families, so that every child in the school has an adult other than their teacher” (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

Support, as described by principal experience, is critical to reform efforts, for lasting change does not happen if mechanisms are not in place to sustain those changes. In moving from NCLB to ESSA, and in considering ESSA’s increased focus on the whole child according to required planning templates and needs assessments studied during document analyses, principal voices described the need for a plethora of environmental supports for successful continuous improvement. Without access to a variety of supports such as building capacity while coaching, collaboration, collegial conversation, relationship building, and professional learning, principals are forced to rely on behavioral and personal experiences upsetting the balance of the three-legged stool representing Bandura’s principle of triadic reciprocal determinism.

### **Sub-Question Three**

Sub-Question Three asked, “How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe personal experiences with school improvement?” While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering sub-question three: progress monitoring helps achieve goals.

Personal experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect emotional and self-efficacy components (Bandura, 1978). Connected with

personal experience, evidence links principal self-efficacy and student achievement (Goddard & Salloum, 2011), and it is also useful to examine the conditions leading to loss of self-efficacy in principals (Versland, 2013). Leaders who experience diminished self-efficacy tend to set less challenging goals and often do not persevere when faced with difficulties, so it can be inferred that principals who suffer a loss of efficacy will have less success with school improvement (Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

In conjunction with personal factors, study results indicated that progress monitoring helped achieve goals. The term “student achievement” has been a buzz word in educational circles for decades, but the term has taken on new meaning with the movement from NCLB to ESSA. Personal principal experiences with school improvement are described through varied assessments, growth as measured through regular data analysis and reflection, and subgroup performance. The increased emphasis on growth under Georgia’s redesigned CCPRI mandates that principals look at not only subgroup and whole school performance but also individual growth such as proficiency levels of students, staff, and themselves. Fiona, in her interview, indicated that “the progress piece is where we need to start focusing” (Fiona, personal communication, November 1, 2018).

New accountability measures under ESSA can be described as continuing to focus on subgroup performance, while not losing sight of the remaining importance of individual student growth. For while all students and staff are ultimately some part of a group whether by ethnicity, socio-economic status, or identified special need, each member is also unique and must be approached in an individualized manner. Ann stated this need to perform on many different levels declaring, “It’s a growth mindset. We can do better and differently” (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). As the focus group session occurred in the middle of a

school year, conversation was ripe with discussion of progress monitoring elements in which participants described successes or challenges associated with current school improvement initiatives. Jerry surmised, “A couple of my grade level visits, I am not pleased with right now. And so, we will go back and find out why we are not seeing what we wanted to see” (Jerry, personal communication, December 17, 2018). Ann, also in the focus group, described mid-year progress, “We spent a quarter of the day for release time reviewing our mid-year data [and] coming up with a plan to restructure our extended learning time” (Ann, personal communication, December 17, 2018). SIPs also reflect progress monitoring elements throughout underscoring the importance of the process to goal attainment. Even when gains are small or seemingly insignificant at times in the realm of school improvement, growth is growth. “We have worked so hard at closing that gap. So with the change in CCRPI, I’m watching that score, we’ve made small, incremental gains, which we are very proud of...” (Geneva, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

### **Summary**

Chapter Four contained study results. Participant information was included along with rich descriptions in the form of participant portraits. Participants shared journeys into leadership, challenging and rewarding school improvement experiences, and gave advice for new leaders entering accountability systems. More results followed and were organized thematically including responses to research questions. Four themes emerged as follows: (a) continuous improvement cultures, (b) strategy does not always align with results, (c) support is critical, and (d) progress monitoring helps achieve goals. Theme development aligned with steps for data analysis, and research question responses answered questions based on collected data. The

purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. The theory guiding this study was Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which explains a triadic view of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Reciprocal interactions between factors contribute to self-efficacy beliefs associated with future action to achieve goals such as those in a Title I School Improvement Plan. This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe their experiences with school improvement? The move from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to new school improvement requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) revealed a qualitative gap in research including principals' voice, especially in different contexts such as high poverty elementary schools. Multiple data collection methods were utilized to discover common themes. Themes were used to meaningfully organize units of information to fully and accurately describe principal experiences. This chapter includes a summary of findings in addition to further discussion and implications. Delimitations and limitations are presented concluding with recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

A variety of data collection methods were utilized in order to allow the principals' voices to tell their stories. Using a descriptive self-efficacy survey, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a focus group, clear themes emerged describing behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences with school improvement. The research questions that guided this study were:

**CQ:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe their experiences with school improvement? This central question aimed at understanding the overall principal experience with school improvement. While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering the central research question: continuous improvement cultures. Supporting the premise of triadic reciprocal determinism, elementary principals described interconnected school improvement experiences related to behavioral, environmental, and personal factors ultimately leading to the cultivation of continuous improvement cultures. Elements such as change, expectation, risk-taking, trust, and family and community engagement, as described through principal experiences, work simultaneously to create cultures promoting positive improvement based on continued growth or toxic cultures characterized by stagnation and decline. Each principal described techniques for cultivating, managing, and maintaining continuous improvement cultures while navigating school improvement.

**SQ1:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe behavioral experiences with school improvement? Behavioral experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect changes in levels of success, changes in productivity, and changes in a variety of self-evaluation methods (Bandura, 1978). While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering this question: strategy does not always align with results. Behaviorally, elementary principals described multiple experiences with strategic methods in an attempt to achieve better results. Accountability elements and the vision to achieve them helped to determine action steps while standards and instruction, root cause analysis, and resource allocation worked together to produce strategies which did not always align with results. Because of this misalignment, analogies associated with playing the school improvement game were often described, but this

did not keep participants from trying to achieve higher levels of success with school improvement. Conscientious effort and persistence are demonstrated by individuals possessing high levels of self-efficacy and consequently, elevated perceptions of self-efficacy correlate with elevated levels of effort and ultimate success (Bandura, 1977).

**SQ2:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe environmental experiences with school improvement? Environmental experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect social and physical components (Bandura, 1978). While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering this question: support is critical. Environmentally, elementary principals described support being necessary to achieve success with school improvement. Success can come in many different forms as described by principals. Participants identified that support can be collaboration in the form of building capacity through coaching, collegial conversation, and feedback, but it also comes in simpler forms such as listening and relationship-building by taking into consideration social-emotional elements of staff and students. Professional learning was described by all principals as a means to support school improvement. The change in accountability systems from NCLB and ESSA has placed an even greater need for support with school improvement in order to manage changing expectations and requirements according to principals.

**SQ3:** How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe personal experiences with school improvement? Personal experiences with school improvement, in conjunction with triadic reciprocal determinism, reflect emotional and self-efficacy components associated with goal setting and attainment (Bandura, 1978). While analyzing data, a major theme emerged answering this question: progress monitoring helps

achieve goals. All principals indicated methods of progress monitoring to help achieve goals, some informally through observation and reflection, and others formally using systemic data review. Whether using various assessments or screeners, looking at data to determine appropriate growth for individuals and subgroups, or engaging in self-reflection to determine next steps, some element of progress monitoring for goal attainment was described by all participants highlighting a common, shared experience with school improvement. Data-driven school improvement leadership in the form of progress monitoring has become the norm, and leaders consistently select how to engage with data and accountability.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. Some results corroborate information presented in the literature review both empirically and theoretically. For example, it has been repeatedly suggested that one of the most important aspects of school improvement is effective leadership (Day et al., 2016; Demski & Racherbaumer, 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Kelley & Dikkers, 2016). There is also quantitative research suggesting leadership-related strategies to increase student achievement (Airola et al., 2014; Merki, 2014). However, what was missing and required to capitalize on the benefits of greater local control under ESSA was the qualitative voice of principals directly responsible for planning, implementing, and leading school improvement structures associated with changing external federal and state mandates (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Gurley et al., 2016). As a result of this study, the evidence base has been broadened in an effort to examine experiences for principals serving in multiple settings such as elementary principals in high poverty schools

(Bouchamma et al., 2014; Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). Additional research confirmations, possible extensions, and novel findings are also included.

### **Theoretical**

Considering that principals are learning through experience and that experience leads to perception while ultimately impacting agency and efficacy, it was important to explore factors influencing behavior leading to optimal performance (Bandura, 1977). Study results do indicate a multitude of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors interacting to produce continuous improvement cultures. However, McCullers and Bozeman (2010) also found that principals' self-efficacy beliefs were positively correlated with beliefs in the attainability of federal and state education goals such as those in NCLB. Study results do not support this finding. All study participants reported moderate to high levels of self-efficacy, and all principals reported some confusion related to success with school improvement, likening the annual changes in CCRPI reporting to playing a game. As the research suggests, schools, systems, and principals are in constant search of the right formula leading to optimal student achievement (Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). This constant search indicates a discrepancy between attainability and effort. Attainability may not be overtly evident, but effort is extreme. Conscientious effort and persistence are demonstrated by individuals possessing high levels of self-efficacy and consequently, elevated perceptions of self-efficacy correlate with elevated levels of effort and ultimate success (Bandura, 1977).

Also based on a previous study and using survey-based research from over 200 superintendents in the southeastern United States, only 17% of participating superintendents believed that SIP goals motivate staff members to increase performance (Dunaway et al., 2013). So if SIP goals do not motivate, this study sheds light on how factors can possibly interact and

motivate to produce desired results. For while strategy does not always directly align with results, progress monitoring and support elements interact to produce continuous improvement cultures. Additional insight into this phenomenon is provided with Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and attention, memory, and motivation in relation to cognition (Bandura, 1977). By capitalizing on interpersonal and interactive organizational and societal processes, leadership for school improvement can be highly efficacious according to basic social learning theory tenets (Bandura, 1977). Interestingly, all principals in the study indicated "some degree" to "a great deal" of self-efficacy overall on the PSES. Study results and the findings associated with support also corroborate earlier findings that true capitalization on collaborative skill and expertise can produce greater intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection, all recognized elements of human agency, or the ability to act on school improvement processes based on higher perceptions of efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

Each principal indicated a need to "begin with the end in mind" in relation to school improvement. Ann summarized, "I'm all about knowing all the rules to the game before we start" (Ann, personal communication, November 5, 2018). But lack of alignment between strategy and results did not stop participants from trying over and over again. As research suggests, leaders who experience low self-efficacy tend to set less challenging goals and often give up when confronted with challenges, suggesting that principals with low self-efficacy may ultimately struggle with direction, building capacity, designing organizations, and implementing strategic instructional design (Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Versland, 2014). However, each participant in this study described instances of disappointment, refocusing efforts, and strategizing yet again, demonstrating high levels of perseverance. As described by moderate to high self-efficacy beliefs reported in the PSES, there appeared to be a correlation between how

much effort and persistence people expend based on self-enhancing or self-hindering thought (Bandura, 2001). Participants in the study displayed remarkable perseverance and were moderately to highly efficacious, but what support was received?

The role of district leadership, as an intermediary between federal and state mandates and schools, is perhaps more important than ever (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Previous research has indicated that district support is most important for principals with less years of experience, and that greater external encouragement and supportive decision-making are required, especially for inexperienced principals (Chang et al., 2015). Less years of experience in this study did not correlate with the need for more district support. In fact, regardless of experience, study results indicated the need for support through collaboration, coaching, collegial conversation, listening, feedback, building relationships, whole child considerations, and professional learning. Supportive cultures lead to greater motivation, and motivation and self-efficacy once again go hand-in hand in Bandura's social learning theory (1977). Leadership does become more complex as leaders navigate challenges related to accountability. Using collaborative processes involving stakeholders, school improvement planning can ultimately breathe life into a conglomeration of comprehensive ideas representing diverse thought processes about what it takes to improve schools. Findings, based on principals' described experiences, indicate that continuous improvement cultures can be used as mechanisms for managing change, setting high expectations, assessing risk, building trust, and including families and communities.

### **Empirical**

It is becoming increasingly evident that leadership is contextual, with macro and micro-politics related to systems and schools (Chitpin, 2016). Results from this study, based on principal experience, revealed contextual processes with the potential to produce greater success

with school improvement (Tubin, 2015). According to study results and principal experiences with school improvement, the need for continuous improvement cultures is paramount.

Concepts associated with continuous improvement cultures are supported by research, and the theme of continuous improvement cultures is connected empirically to the literature on school improvement and leadership. For example, in an isolated study, Cherkowski and Walker (2016) utilized qualitative means to capture principal voice through stories and explanations to describe the general concept of “flourishing” among principals (p. 378). While there was no clear definition from previous study of what it meant to succeed in the school improvement work of schools, descriptions from principals indicated feelings of success when working collaboratively and purposefully with teachers to create continuously improved learning environments (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016). This study extended earlier findings more clearly articulating experiences with specific elements such as change, expectation, trust, risk, and stakeholder engagement leading to positive cultures of continuous school improvement.

Specific to the concept of change as related to crafting continuous improvement cultures, in a groundbreaking meta-analysis based on 30 years of research and involving almost 3,000 schools, Waters et al. (2003) focused on relationships between leadership and student achievement and addressed change in connection with school improvement. It was suggested that effective leaders know how to balance initiatives related to change while protecting school culture and values (Waters et al., 2003). Because the term “culture” can be broad and misunderstood at times, study results extend findings to show that to achieve continuous improvement cultures, change must be balanced with expectation, trust, risk, and stakeholder engagement. Successful leaders should be well-acquainted with the amount of change required to achieve tasks and adjust leadership styles accordingly (Waters et al., 2003). It has been quite

difficult to pre-gauge the amount of change required due to the infancy of the shift from NCLB to ESSA, but principals are learning by doing (Crum et al., 2010). As described by principals, progress monitoring happens more regularly, and different strategies are employed while managing change, expectation, and risk with continuous improvement. As the research suggests, schools, systems, and principals are in constant search of the right formula leading to optimal student achievement (Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015).

School improvement at its most basic level constitutes change (Protheroe, 2011). Change in data use is just one way in which school improvement has evolved. All study participants described varied experiences utilizing multiple tools to measure progress to set goals and revisit effectiveness indicating data management and use were not always equal among participants (Ramsteck et al., 2014). In support of previous research findings, some schools, as described by principals, implemented major efforts and committed substantial time in response to data, while other schools and leaders committed less time and effort (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015). But in conjunction with the theme of support for successful school improvement, all principals mentioned some form of collaboration culminating in building capacity for future ownership of goals and progress monitoring for staff. Focusing on a more global perspective of data-driven leadership, study findings also support previous research proposing that leadership associated with data-driven best practices is often too narrowly defined, and should be considered in relation to building leadership capacity in others from a distributed leadership perspective (Demski & Racherbaumer, 2015).

For as discovered in the study, support is critical to successful school improvement experience building on the concept of collaboration and more specifically describing support structures that should be present during improvement. Building capacity was just one

component mentioned repeatedly in the context of support. In previous research, Kelley and Dikkers (2016) suggest that in order to increase leadership capacity among staff, principals should require transparency in student and staff assessments, generating collaborative discussions. These collaborative, capacity-building sessions are suggested to ultimately impact practices leading to greater improvement and achievement (Kelley & Dikkers, 2016).

Confirming the needs for building capacity, each principal in the study described instances of collaborative discussion among staff regarding student assessment and these activities were also reflected in SIPs.

Despite progress, there is an inherent impression that principals still lack the knowledge and skill to develop capacity for change due to school improvement process complexity (Feldhoff et al., 2014). Study results do not support previous research in this area. Principals in the study described repeatedly that school improvement processes can be complex and even frustrating at times, but they are not impossible. Results indicate that even though strategy does not always align with results, progress monitoring and various elements of support can develop successful continuous improvement cultures. The concept of continuous improvement cultures and the interconnectedness of behavioral, environment, and personal factors also supports previous research indicating that a balance must be located between internal and external processes in order for increased accountability to result in true building-level, leader-driven, stakeholder-owned improvement (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2010). As study findings also suggest, with effective collaboration, systemic processes and tiered support become more streamlined and offer timely, individualized leadership support and greater capacity building for leading school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Study results support the idea that although ESSA seemed to initially promise what most educators have been advocating for in terms of growth, it is not easy to implement (Klein, 2016). As reflected in study results, efficacious leaders look at complex school improvement tasks as challenges (Bandura, 1997). This research adds to the limited body of research related to the day-to-day work involved and competencies required for effective school management and improvement in the age of increased accountability (Bouchamma et al., 2014).

### **Implications**

To capitalize on the benefits of greater local control touted by ESSA, the qualitative voice of principals directly responsible for planning, implementing, and leading school improvement structures associated with changing external federal and state mandates was needed (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Gurley et al., 2016). Qualitative data exploring elementary principal experiences with school improvement gave voice to those directly responsible for the day-to-day management and improvement of schools. Insights into the experiences of elementary principals can potentially shape the way improvement processes, expectations, and supports are implemented, streamlining accountability structures. Study results include possible recommendations for policy makers, state and district support, and principals.

### **Theoretical**

Principal responsibilities have increased since first approval of ESEA in 1965, and the addition of mandated accountability measures has placed more external pressure on building level principals to improve schools (Airola et al., 2013; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Accountability pressures, and the way pressures are processed and acted upon, create how school improvement requirements are experienced on behalf of the school principal as school improvement leader (Bandura, 1998). Data across the nation continue to suggest that student

achievement remains stagnant (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). Study results potentially impact university and district educator preparation and leadership development. Considering the increased responsibility of principals to positively affect student achievement, it is important that leaders develop high levels of self-efficacy (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

With modern accountability systems, it is currently difficult to definitively correlate high quality leadership with greater student achievement due to ever changing, quantitative reporting mechanisms such as those found in CCRPI. Qualitative measures, such as the ones used in this study, however, clearly indicate higher levels of self-efficacy correlating with higher levels of perceived success with school improvement. Results supported social learning theory, as presented in Chapter Two (Bandura, 1977). “Within the process of reciprocal determinism lies the opportunity for people to shape their destinies as well as the limits of self-direction” (Bandura, 1978, p. 357). Also mirroring the premise of triadic reciprocal determinism, elementary principals described interconnected experiences related to behavioral, environmental, personal experiences ultimately leading to the creation of continuous improvement cultures. Elements such as change, expectation, risk-taking, trust, and family and community engagement worked simultaneously to create cultures promoting positive or toxic improvement cultures. Additionally, behavioral factors related to strategy, environmental factors associated with support, and personal factors illustrating progress monitoring were described by principals in the context of experience with school improvement.

Theoretical implications may necessitate consideration of how prepared school leaders are to lead school improvement in the face of required changes, but no direct correlation was found between years of principal experience and levels of self-efficacy in this study. In fact, one of the leaders with the most experience, reported the lowest level of self-efficacy, while

interviews and document analysis also supported this finding. Study results support findings in previous research suggesting that 96% of principals feel that experience while performing the job or mentoring received from colleagues is more valuable than formal principal preparation to assist with successful school improvement (Hess & Kelly, 2007). How can this support be ensured? The value of leaders having access to continuous support from professionals with expertise, strategic insight, and interpersonal abilities to assist principals in leading school improvement should not be undervalued (Gaffney et al., 2012).

What can be learned from reciprocal interactions between behavioral, environmental, and personal factors during this shift as interactions give context to one's sense of self-efficacy (Airola, Bengtson, Davis, & Peer, 2014)? Highly efficacious people are the kinds of individuals most want leading schools if greater levels of effort and success are the result. Study findings suggest that effective continuous improvement cultures can be created and sustained by considering certain elements, and efficacious school improvement experiences do not have to be left to chance or to greater years of leadership experience. Continuous improvement cultures can be purposefully cultivated by attending to the elements of change, expectation, trust, risk, and stakeholder engagement. School principals regularly juggle reciprocal determinants as they are ultimately responsible for creating, implementing, and tracking progress associated with school improvement based on the needs of their schools (Osbourne-Lampkin et al., 2015).

### **Empirical**

Principals' voices describing experiences with school improvement efforts are largely missing in research (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Merki, 2014). The lack of qualitative data is due, in part, to the relative infancy of the mandated accountability shift and the primarily quantitative nature of school improvement and ultimate

accountability in the context of assessment. “There are a number of areas in the new law in which implementation could benefit from the principals' voices” (Superville, 2016, p. 14). Policymakers, much like the legislative branch of government of which they are a part, make school improvement rules. District office personnel, like the judicial branch, evaluate and then communicate the rules often providing accountability for federal and state mandates such as NCLB and ESSA. Principals then, like the executive branch, are ultimately responsible for carrying out school improvement rules and requirements in their respective schools.

The evidence base benefits from this study and its attempt to examine principal experiences with school improvement in settings such as high poverty schools (Bouchamma et al., 2014; Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). This qualitative study provides additional insight into the day-to-day work involved and competencies required for effective school management and improvement in the age of increased accountability (Bouchamma et al., 2014). Findings in this area generate purposeful thinking about the benefits of reviewing what works when leading school improvement (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016). Continuous improvement cultures consider change, expectation, risk-taking, trust, and family and community involvement as they work simultaneously to create positive or toxic improvement environments. Continuous improvement cultures also involve elements of appropriate strategy, progress monitoring, and support.

### **Practical**

Educational accountability has political and economic ties, as it is thought that the results of greater accountability achieve alignment of public goals and educational purpose, along with improved student performance and productivity as defined by academic achievement (Leithwood & Earl, 2000). Effective and efficient support systems are necessary to help facilitate shifts in changing accountability requirements. To be successful with school improvement, research

emphasizes the value of leaders having access to continuous support from professionals with expertise, strategic insight, and interpersonal abilities to assist principals in leading school improvement (Gaffney et al., 2012). District leadership does have the potential to have a positive impact on student outcomes at the school level (Dunaway et al., 2013).

Leadership support from state and district staff must shift from mere compliance to collaborative development support (Yatso et al., 2015). Findings suggest that more independent approaches to school improvement should allow flexibility for school and district leaders to collaborate while leveraging skills, talents, and expertise (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017).

The underlying goal of school improvement is to “professionalize school processes for student learning and thus to achieve high school quality” (Merki, 2014, p. 593). Study findings indicate that principals’ experiences with strategy, support, and progress monitoring all work together to create effective or ineffective continuous improvement cultures focused on change, raised expectations, trust, engagement with stakeholders, and management of risk. True capitalization on collaborative skill and expertise can produce greater intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection, all recognized elements of human agency, or the ability to act on school improvement processes based on higher perceptions of efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Purposeful decisions were made to define the boundaries for the study. Northeast Georgia is a diverse geographic area consisting mostly of suburban and rural school districts. Within this diversity, there is poverty across the entire region, and almost all school systems have Title I schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). This study included elementary principals with three or more years of experience in their current Title I schools having had first-hand knowledge and rich experience with school improvement mandates and reporting under

both NCLB and now ESSA, which was proposed in December 2015 by President Barack Obama. Elementary principals also help establish firm foundations for future student success as students move on to middle and high school, and experiences leading school improvement impact elementary principals in greater numbers, as there are larger numbers of elementary schools across Northeast Georgia (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

While studying van Manen's (1990) and Moustakas' (1994) texts, I believed that the transcendental phenomenological philosophy allowed thorough exploration of principal experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability using their own voices revealing meaning and truth. While hermeneutic phenomenology relies on interpretation (van Manen, 1990), transcendental phenomenology emphasizes moving away from preconceived notions allowing the meaning of phenomena to transcend or emerge through analysis of textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Quantifiable measures permeate the current research landscape studying leadership in school improvement (Braun et al., 2011; Chappelle & Price, 2012; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). A qualitative, phenomenological study makes meaning of action, behavior, intention, and experience as it happens in the real world (van Manen, 1990). Thus, a phenomenological approach was appropriate to study elementary principal experiences with school improvement in light of changing federal and state mandates moving from NCLB to ESSA. Phenomenology allowed me to understand the essence of principal experiences with school improvement through synthesis of meaning (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

Limitations of the study included a lack of diversity in ethnicity for participants. Study participants were selected using three methods of purposeful sampling in the form of snowballing, using superintendent referrals to select participants (see Appendix B), intensity,

including only participants with a minimum of three years of experience, and maximum variation, incorporating a selection of participants based on differing demographics including suburban and rural schools, both male and female participants, variety of experience, and ethnicity (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). While Superintendent referrals increased the likelihood of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015), differing demographics in relation to ethnicity was not achieved. All participants were Caucasian limiting generalizability of findings. The current demographics for elementary principals in the Northeast Georgia region consist of a majority of female, Caucasian leaders mirroring student participation (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Phenomenological study findings attempted to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement. It was important to describe the phenomenon of principal experience with school improvement in order to examine the “shared experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). Supporting the premise of triadic reciprocal determinism in this study, elementary principals describe interconnected experiences related to behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences leading to the creation of continuous improvement cultures. Findings indicated that elements such as change, expectation, risk-taking, trust, and family and community involvement work simultaneously to create cultures promoting positive improvement. Future research could provide more in-depth study related to each behavioral, environmental, and personal factor as described by principals to include strategy, support, and achievement. In-depth analysis could provide more direction on how to better align strategy, provide support, and monitor growth in order to “professionalize school processes for student learning and thus to achieve high school quality” (Merki, 2014, p. 593).

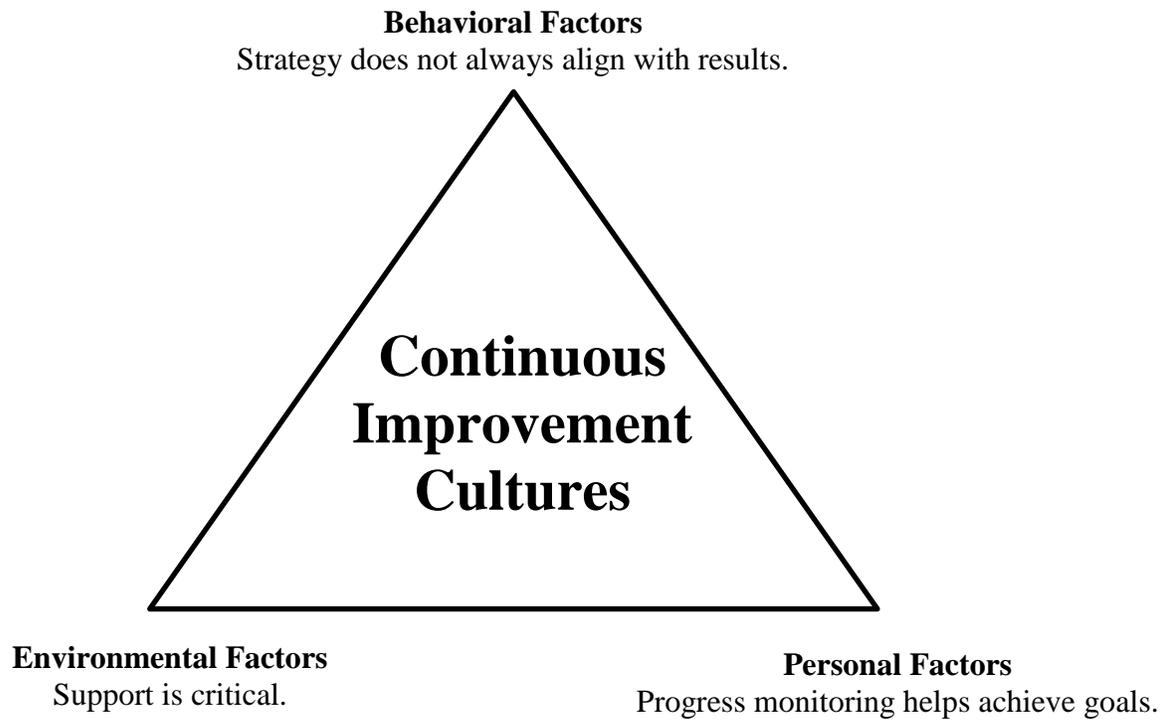
With better understanding of the experience of school improvement processes through phenomenological study, next steps would include case study. As three distinct school districts were represented in the study, future research could include in-depth of analysis of specific districts as described experiences in terms of support and expectation were somewhat different based on school system expectations, processes, and described support structures. Additional study recommendations include selections for a broader range of participants to include urban districts in an effort to capture greater diversity, and research to involve secondary level leaders capturing similarities and differences with school improvement experiences. Further study on schools with different goals and differing levels of leader self-efficacy can reveal additional processes and routines contributing to greater leadership success with changing demands and expectations associated with school improvement as well (Tubin, 2015). With future research, more pieces to the puzzle of triadic reciprocal determinism can be discovered and greater balance achieved with the three-legged stool of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors (Bandura, 1978).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary principals' experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools. The theory guiding this study is Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which explains a triadic view of behavioral, environmental, and personal factors. Reciprocal interactions between factors contribute to self-efficacy beliefs associated with future action to achieve goals such as those in a Title I School Improvement Plan.

This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I schools describe their experiences

with school improvement? Study findings, as described by principal experiences, suggest that effective continuous improvement cultures can be sustained by effectively strategizing (behavioral factor), supporting (environmental factor), and progress monitoring to achieve goals (personal factor). Behaviorally, elementary principals described multiple strategic methods in an attempt to achieve better results. Accountability elements and the vision to achieve them helped to determine action steps while standards and instruction, root cause analysis, and resource allocation worked together to produce strategies which did not always align with results. Environmentally, elementary principals described support being critical to the success of school improvement. Support, as described by participants, can be collaboration in the form of building capacity through coaching, collegial conversation, and feedback, but it also comes in simpler forms such as listening and relationship-building by taking into consideration social-emotional elements of staff and students. Professional learning was described by all principals as a means to support school improvement. All principals indicated methods of progress monitoring to help achieve goals including using various assessments, looking at data to determine appropriate growth for individuals and subgroups, culminating in self-reflection to determine next steps. Figure 3 includes an anecdotal illustration of findings as supported by triadic reciprocal determinism.



*Figure 3.* Anecdotal illustration of study findings based on Bandura (1977). Graphic Leigh Sears 2019.

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**APPENDIX A: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 17, 2018

Leigh Sears

IRB Approval 3351.071718: Moving Targets: A Phenomenological Study of Elementary Principal Experiences With School Improvement in the Age of Accountability

Dear Leigh Sears,

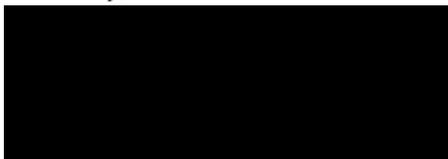
We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX B: E-MAIL INVITATION TO SUPERINTENDENTS**

Date  
Recipient  
Superintendent  
School System  
Address 1  
Address 2  
Address 3

Dear Superintendent,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools, and I am writing to invite four elementary principals to participate in my study.

Participant criteria include three years of experience leading a Title I school in the current school location and willingness to participate. Participants will be asked to participate in a brief, descriptive self-efficacy survey (10 – 15 minutes); complete a one-to-one, semi-structured interview with the researcher on his/her own campus (60 – 90 minutes); provide access to individual school improvement plans for three consecutive years (10 – 15 minutes); review transcribed interview (30 minutes); participate in a concluding focus group discussion with the researcher and other participating principals via Google ZOOM technology (60 – 90 minutes); and review transcribed focus group session (30 minutes). Principal names will be requested as part of participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To suggest four elementary principal participants, please complete the Google form including participant referral and email address at <https://goo.gl/forms/aXyYe6z2VDqfmyyf2>.

Suggested participants will be sent official consent forms prior to participation and in no way are obligated to participate based on your referral.

I appreciate your possible participant referrals. If you have any additional questions, please contact Mrs. Leigh Sears at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Leigh Sears  
Doctoral Candidate

**APPENDIX C: E-MAIL INVITATION TO RECOMMENDED PRINCIPALS**

Date  
Recipient  
Principal  
School  
Address 1  
Address 2  
Address 3

Dear Principal,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

You were referred by your Superintendent as a possible research participant, and I am writing to secure your official consent for participation. Participation is voluntary.

Participant criteria include three years of experience leading a Title I school in the current school location and willingness to participate. Participants will be asked to participate in a brief, descriptive self-efficacy survey (10 – 15 minutes); complete a one-to-one, semi-structured interview with the researcher on his/her own campus (60 – 90 minutes); provide access to individual school improvement plans for three consecutive years (10 – 15 minutes); review a transcribed interview (30 minutes), participate in a concluding focus group discussion with the researcher and other participating principals via Google ZOOM technology (60 – 90 minutes); and review a transcribed focus group session (30 minutes). Your name will be requested as part of your participation, but your identity will remain confidential.

I appreciate your consideration of participation. Please click on the included link if you are willing to participate, and a consent document will be emailed to you.

<https://goo.gl/forms/4sLSwRnKm7R3aWX03>

The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you agree to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the one-to-one interview.

Participants will receive a gift card to a local restaurant.

Sincerely,

Leigh Sears  
Doctoral Candidate

## APPENDIX D: INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Dear Principal,

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on the study of elementary principal experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability. Your contribution is appreciated, and I am excited about your participation as a participant. To secure your signature on the required consent form, I want to restate and summarize some of the information already shared.

The research model I am using is a qualitative one, and I will be seeking descriptions of your experiences with school improvement moving from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). These descriptions will hopefully help to answer my research question: “How do elementary principals who serve as leaders in Northeast Georgia Title I Schools describe their experiences with school improvement?”

Your descriptions will assist with comprehending the essence of principal experience during this legislative transition involving changing school improvement mandates. You will be asked to describe behavioral, environmental, and personal experiences with school improvement based on perceptions, senses, and knowledge. I am seeking candid, accurate, and vivid accounts of your experiences with school improvement in the newest age of accountability.

Your participation is greatly valued, and I appreciate your time and effort. If you have any questions before signing the consent form, please contact Mrs. Leigh Sears at

[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Leigh Sears  
Doctoral Candidate

## APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT FORM

Moving Targets: Elementary Principal Experiences with School Improvement  
Leigh B. Sears, principal investigator  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of elementary principal experiences with school improvement. You were selected as a possible participant based on superintendent referral and your completion of three consecutive years at your current location as principal. Please read this form and ask any questions you have regarding the study before agreeing to be in the study.

Leigh B. Sears, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- Complete a descriptive self-efficacy survey. (10 – 15 minutes)
- Complete a one-to-one semi-structured interview with the researcher (60 – 90 minutes)
- Provide researcher with a copy of or access to individual school improvement plans for three consecutive years. (10 – 15 minutes)
- Review transcribed interview (30 minutes)
- Participate in a focus group discussion with the researcher and other participating principals via Google ZOOM technology (60 – 90 minutes)
- Review transcribed focus group session (30 minutes)

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

Risks involved in this study are minimal and are no more than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in the study.

### **Compensation:**

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Compensation will be a gift card to a local restaurant. Additionally, participants will be debriefed on outcomes and implications of the research in exchange for participation.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym, and the interview will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Records, recordings, and transcripts will be housed in password-protected files, may be used in future presentations, and will be destroyed after three years. Hard copy records will be stored in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed after three years. All electronic files will be backed up on a flash drive which will also be stored in a locked file cabinet when not in use and destroyed after three years. Access to interview and focus group data will be made available to the researcher and a hired transcriptionist. Data will not be used for any other purpose outside of this study without consent. Because focus group structure requires involvement from additional participants, identity and information protection during focus group participation cannot be assured. I also cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision regarding participation will not affect your current or future relationship with Liberty University, [REDACTED], or the study's principle investigator, Leigh Sears. If you do decide to participate, you are free to decline answering any question or withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from the focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contracts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Leigh B. Sears. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her via e-mail to [REDACTED]. If you have questions later, you can contact the researcher at the same e-mail address or telephone number. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and desire to speak with someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to address the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall Ste. 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX F: THANK YOU EMAIL AND FOCUS GROUP INVITATION**

Dear Principal,

Thank you for meeting with me and participating in an interview related to your experiences with school improvement in the age of accountability. I am thankful for your willingness to share behavioral, environmental, and personal thoughts and feelings.

To increase confidence in data collection, I am inviting you to participate in a focus group interview via Google ZOOM technology. Though not face-to-face, the online focus group will consist of other principals participating in the study and will provide a system of checks and balances for information gathered. Discussion will be video recorded and transcribed using a transcriptionist to be included in study results and conclusions.

I truly value your continued participation in this study and your willingness to share experiences with school improvement, and I also look forward to your participation in the focus group. As always, if you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at



Sincerely,

Leigh Sears  
Doctoral Candidate

## APPENDIX G: DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY

The purpose of this study is to describe elementary principal experiences with school improvement in Northeast Georgia Title I schools in the age of accountability. The descriptive survey is intended to capture demographics including gender, setting, years of total experience, race/ethnicity as well as self-perceptions of efficacy using an adaptation of the Principal Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004). The PSES is made of 18 assessment items using a Likert-type scale and is available on page 581 at [http://www.bwgriffin.com/gsu/courses/edur9131/content/1\\_FA\\_principal\\_efficacy.pdf](http://www.bwgriffin.com/gsu/courses/edur9131/content/1_FA_principal_efficacy.pdf)

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Current School: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Current System: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Years of Experience as a Principal: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### *Open-Ended Interview Questions*

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#### Questions

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#### *Opening Questions*

1. Please describe the journey that led you to becoming a principal.
2. What do you consider your most rewarding experiences as principal?
3. What do you consider your most challenging experiences as principal?

#### *Questions Related to NCLB Experiences*

4. Describe behavioral experiences with school improvement under NCLB.
5. Describe environmental experiences with school improvement under NCLB.
6. Describe personal experiences with school improvement under NCLB.
7. How did these experiences impact you and your confidence leading school improvement?

#### *Questions Related to ESSA Experiences*

8. Describe behavioral experiences with school improvement under ESSA.
9. Describe environmental experiences with school improvement under ESSA.
10. Describe personal experiences with school improvement under ESSA.
11. How do these experiences impact you and your confidence leading school improvement?

#### *Questions Related to Experiences Leading School Improvement with Changing Mandates*

12. How do you perceive the commonalities and differences associated with NCLB and ESSA?
13. Describe a time when you have felt successful with school improvement.

14. Describe a time when you felt unsuccessful with school improvement.
15. How do you think successes or challenges with school improvement impact you as a leader?
16. How could school improvement planning be designed and framed to better support leaders at the school level?

*Questions Related to Role of Expert in Leading School Improvement*

17. Reflecting on your experience as a principal, what advice would you give to new principals as they begin to work with accountability and school improvement?
18. Looking ahead to the new accountability requirements under ESSA, how do you expect your leadership to change or develop over the next several years?
19. We've covered a lot of ground, and I appreciate the time you have dedicated to this. One final question... What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experiences with school improvement?

## APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

### *Focus Group Questions*

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#### Questions

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#### *Opening Question*

1. How are school improvement processes going so far this year?

#### *Questions Related to Triadic Reciprocal Determinism*

2. Describe behavioral experiences with school improvement under NCLB and ESSA.
3. Describe environmental experiences with school improvement under NCLB and ESSA.
4. Describe personal experiences with school improvement under NCLB and ESSA.

#### *Questions Related to Leadership Empowerment*

5. How did these experiences impact you and your confidence leading school improvement?
6. How do you think accountability should be structured in schools?
7. What additional support do you think would be helpful in leading school improvement?

#### *Questions Related to Principal Voice*

8. If you had the ear of legislators who make laws concerning school improvement, what would you want them to know?
9. If you had the ear of district office leaders who oversee school improvement in your system, what would you want them to know?
10. What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experiences with school improvement?

**APPENDIX J: TITLE I SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN DOCUMENT**

School Name: \_\_\_\_\_ District Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Principal Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School Year: \_\_\_\_\_  
 School Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 District Title I Director/Coordinator Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 District Title I Director/Coordinator Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

**ESEA WAIVER ACCOUNTABILITY STATUS**

(Check all boxes that apply and provide additional information if requested.)

Priority School

Focus School

Title I Alert School

**Principal's Signature:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Title I Director's Signature:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Superintendent's Signature:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Revision Date: \_\_\_\_ Revision Date: \_\_\_\_ Revision Date: \_\_\_\_

**SWP Template Instructions**

- All components of a Title I School wide Program Plan and a School Improvement Plan must be addressed. When using SWP and SIP checklists, all components/elements marked as "Not Met" need additional development.
- Please add your planning committee members on the next page.
- The first ten components in the template are required components as set forth in Section 1114 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).
- Please submit your School Improvement Plan as an addendum after the header page in this document.

**Planning Committee Members**

NAME	MEMBER'S SIGNATURE	POSITION/ROLE
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SWP/SIP Components:

1. A comprehensive needs assessment of the entire school, (including taking into account the needs of migratory children as defined in Section 1309(2)) that is based on information which includes the achievement of children in relation to the state academic content standards and the state student academic achievement standards described in Section 1111(b)(1).

Response:

2. School wide reform strategies that:

Response:

Provide opportunities for all children to meet the state's proficient and advanced levels of student academic achievement described in Section 1111(b)(1)(D).

Response:

Use effective methods and instructional strategies that are based on scientifically based research that:

- o strengthen the core academic program in the school.
- o increase the amount and quality of learning time, such as providing and extended school year and before- or after-school and summer programs and opportunities, and help provide an enriched and accelerated curriculum
- o include strategies for meeting the educational needs of historically underserved populations

Response:

Include strategies to address the needs of all children in the school, but particularly the needs of low-achieving children and those at risk of not meeting the state student achievement standards who are members of the target population of any program that is included in the school wide program which may include:

- o counseling, pupil services, and mentoring services;
- o college and career awareness and preparation, such as college and career guidance, personal finance education, and innovative teaching methods, which may include applied learning and team-teaching strategies; and
- o the integration of vocational and technical education programs; and

Response:

Address how the school will determine if such needs have been met; and

Are consistent with, and are designed to implement, the state and local improvement plans, if any.

Response:

3. Instruction by highly qualified professional staff

Response:

4. In accordance with Section 1119 and subsection (a)(4), high-qualified and ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, and paraprofessionals and, if

appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff to enable all children in the school to meet the state's student academic achievement standards.

Response:

5. Strategies to attract high-quality highly qualified teachers to high-need schools.

Response:

6. Strategies to increase parental involvement in accordance with Section 1118, such as family literacy services.

Response:

7. Plans for assisting preschool children in the transition from early childhood programs, such as Head Start, Even Start, Early Reading First, or a state-run preschool program, to local elementary school programs.

Response:

8. Measures to include teachers in the decisions regarding the use of academic assessments described in Section 1111(b)(3) in order to provide information on, and to improve, the achievement of individual students and the overall instructional program.

Response:

9. Activities to ensure that students who experience difficulty mastering the proficient or advanced levels of academic achievement standards required by Section 1111(b)(1) shall be provided with effective, timely additional assistance, which shall include measures to ensure that students' difficulties are identified on a timely basis and to provide sufficient information on which to base effective assistance.

Response:

10. Coordination and integration of federal, state, and local services and programs, including programs supported under this Act, violence prevention programs, nutrition programs, housing programs, Head Start, adult education, vocational and technical education, and job training

Response:

11. Description of how individual student assessment results and interpretation will be provided to parents.

Response:

12. Provisions for the collection and disaggregation of data on the achievement and assessment results of students.

Response:

13. Provisions to ensure that disaggregated assessment results for each category are valid and reliable.

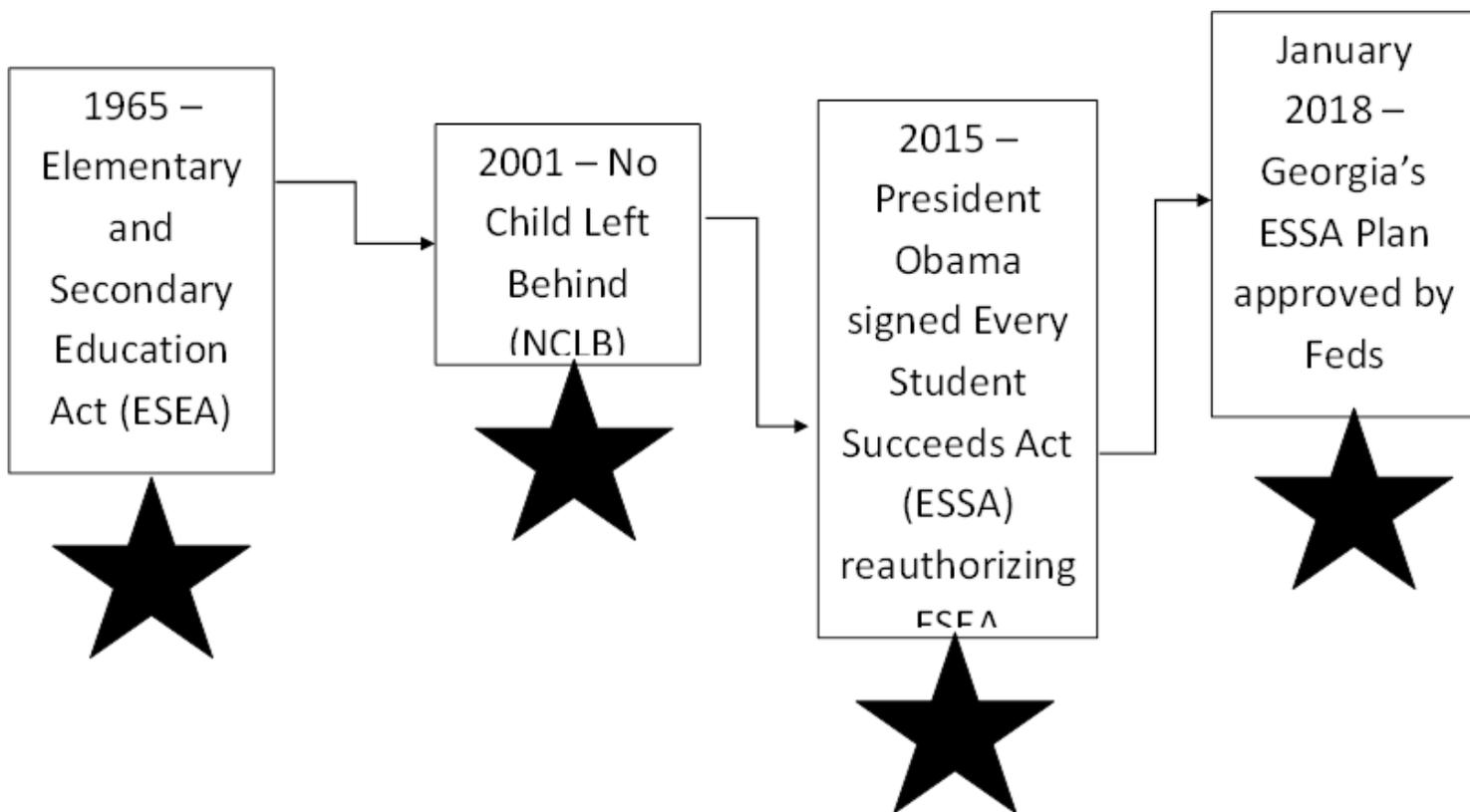
Response:

14. Provisions for public reporting of disaggregated data.  
Response:
15. Plan developed during a one-year period, unless the LEA, after considering the recommendation of its technical assistance providers, determines that less time is needed to develop and implement the school wide program  
Response:
16. Plan developed with the involvement of the community to be served and individuals who will carry out the plan, including teachers, principals, other school staff, and pupil service personnel, parents, and students (if secondary).  
Response:
17. Plan available to the LEA, parents, and the public.  
Response:
18. Plan translated, to the extent feasible, into any language that a significant percentage of the parents of participating students in the school speak as their primary language.  
Response:
19. Plan is subject to the school improvement provisions of Section 1116.  
Response:

**APPENDIX K: TABLE FOR SCHEDULING ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS**

Participants' Pseudonym	Date	Time
Ann	Monday, November 5	6:30 am
Beth	Monday, November 5	2:45 pm
Chloe	Tuesday, November 6	8:00 am
Debra	Thursday, November 8	7:30 am
Eve	Monday, November 12	10:00 am
Fiona	Monday, November 12	2:00 pm
Geneva	Wednesday, December 12	1:30 pm
Hope	Thursday, December 13	8:00 am
Isabel	Wednesday, December 19	2:00 pm
Jerry	Thursday, November 1	3:00 pm
Kirk	Monday, November 5	12:30 pm
Luke	Wednesday, December 12	10:00 am

**APPENDIX L: VISUAL TIMELINE REFERENCE**



**APPENDIX M: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Participant: Jerry's Transcript

Researcher: Please describe the journey that led you to becoming a principal.

Jerry: When I went into education, I did not imagine becoming a principal. I went into education because I, uh, had an opportunity to be a substitute teacher when I was 19, in a high school no less. I hadn't really thought much about becoming an educator. In fact, straight out of high school, I majored in business originally when I went to college, but then some changes in my life occurred and I ended up, um, in a new location and I, uh, had a mutual friend with a principal and then I got introduced and he said, "Well, I could use a good substitute. Would you be willing to?" I said, "Oh, sure." I said, "I don't have a degree." "It doesn't matter. You just come on in here, we'll use you." And boy, they used me about every day too. And so, I fell in love with the school environment, um, the dynamics of working with kids and teachers. I didn't have a whole lot of interaction with parents at that time as a substitute teacher, but I fell in love with what happens in the school and the, um, dynamics of that environment. So, as such, when I went back to college myself, I decided I was going to be a teacher and I was going to be a high school teacher. And so, that was what my undergraduate degree in ... ended up being in was, uh, secondary ed with, uh, science was my area. Then from there, um, I-I taught for, uh, I don't know, it wasn't very long to be honest with you. I taught, really one year in a public high school and then ... I'll give you more information than you need, but you can call out what you don't, I guess. After that one year, I had someone ask me if I'd help them start a church and so I moved to Dalen and helped start a church and, uh, I was with that guy. I thought I might be with him for a while, but it turned out only to be about a year. But, during that time I go introduced to someone who was looking for a principal for their Christian school, but here I am a

very young man and really no administrative experience to speak of, but sometimes private schools are just looking for someone that looks nice and has a pulse. I at least had a pulse. I don't know about looking the part, but I worked in that Christian school in Dalen for four years as the principal. First, I was just the 7-12 principal, then the, uh, early grades principal retired and so the superintendent said, "Now you're the pre K-12 principal." So, I did that for three years. So it was a great experience. Um, but again, I didn't really have the credentials to be an administrator at the time, I-I was, um, I was a credentialed teacher. So anyway, I left there and went back to public schools in Calton where I taught 8th grade for three years. And, uh, during that time I was invited to, uh, participate with Calton's leadership cohort, they used to do an internal leadership training, kind of like we've done similarly in our district here. And so, at the end of that it seemed like the people just thought, "Oh, Mr. Jerry is gonna be an administrator." Um, and so sure enough, when a position opened up in the middle school where I worked, I was asked by the new principal, who had been the previous assistant principal, I was asked to, uh, to be his assistant. I'd went through the process before, so now ... but that's where I first entered, so I didn't really go into it thinking, "I'm gonna be a principal." And probably most principals don't say that, um, and, and so I was tapped for that opportunity. Then I was happy doing the assistant principal work, uh, at the middle school. I really enjoyed it. Um, and then the principal from the elementary school in the same district took a district level position. She became assistant superintendent. And so they opened that position, I did not apply for it. I was happy where I was, and quite frankly there were other people that were probably in line for it before me, so to speak. Um, and then the last day that applications could be turned in, the former principal who had moved to the district office called me, she said, "Are you gonna apply for that position?" I said, "No, I'm not going to. I'm kinda happy where I am." She said, "Oh, I think you should." I did,

and I was happy to work in that position for three years in Calon. Left there to go to a private Christian school, where I was for three years, and that was a hard decision for me. It was hard because I loved what I was doing in Calon at the elementary school there. Um, I-I-I felt like it was a community where I had some roots, and I had been there for 20 yearsish. And so the decision to leave really was rooted more in my, uh, son, who at the time was a 10th grader. Seemed like he was really eager to have a different kind of an environment, and the Christian school environment seemed to be one that, uh, was calling his name. And so at first I-I ... and that was another one, I was contacted by them to see, "Will you come", they said to be headmaster at first, and I thanked them but said "No, I'm really happy where I am." Uh, but then where I could see in ... the d-disappointment in my son's eyes, I really felt the Lord was prompting me. This isn't about you or your career, this is about something you're gonna do for your kids. So, I called them back in January and they said, "Yeah we're still looking for the next school year." So, that's how I ended up in the Christian school in Cootil, where I was for three years. At the end of that three years, um, I knew I was ready to get back in public. I felt like the story sounds like you're here, you're there, you're here, you're there. And I always felt like it was kind of bad for my resume. I talked to a former superintendent, I told her about that and she told me, she said, "Well, there's another way of looking at it, it could be that you're just in such high demand you keep getting recruited in different places." I said, "I like that way of looking at it." But anyway, I did, I went to Cootil for three years and worked as the principal, um, at, uh, The Christian Academy. And then, I ended up in Gansit, and, uh, I really ... coming to Gansit was a... I had not planned to move to be frank with you, but I just looked at what was happening at the Christian school, and the budget, the politics. And a lot of that is sometimes distasteful... and I just knew it was time for a new chapter in the life of my family and, even my

career, so I put in a couple of applications. I really, to be honest with you, Researcher, I was shocked when, uh, Dr. Z called me. I put the application in a ... this was by the way, this was at the end of May. I don't think you typically apply for the principal's job just at the end of May, but I-I put the application in, um, on a Tuesday evening. I think she called on a Thursday and asked if I could be there on, um, Friday morning. So, I moved heaven and earth to get to Gansit and interview. She called me back on Saturday to offer the job. I said, "Mmm, let me talk to my wife and I'll get back with you." I talked to my wife, she said, "Are you crazy? Call her back and tell her of course you want the job." I called her back and told her, "I'd be honored to have the job." And so, on Tuesday, after the interview, my picture was in the paper here in, in Gansit introducing me as the new principal. I'm probably sharing too much. It reminded me of the Old Testament story about Abraham climbing Mt. Moriah, being prepared to offer up his son, but finding a ram in the thicket. And the Lord provided, and it was a matter of Abraham's faithfulness... that God was ready to have provision made for him. My wife just nudged me and she said, "Do you realize that is your ram in the thicket, right?" Because I really thought it was my faithfulness and trust in God that took me out of Calon, to be willing to go to that Christian school place for my children. And when that season was over it was like, "Okay now what Lord?" And this is my career, this is my family, this is my mortgage, you know, what are we gonna do? And, in one week, in one week the Lord gave me a job as a principal in a school, in a district where I didn't know anybody. Now you know that that's just something that's ... it's unusual. I will go as far as to call it miraculous, but you can put that in your study or not. Anyway, so that's how I got to where I am, but it wasn't that I ever, you know, thought one day, "I'm gonna go to school and be a principal." Um, but it, it happened. So, I've heard of other people tell of, of their move into administration. How it wasn't necessarily something that they

volunteered, or aspired for, but often times I think ... I have to be careful when you share it because I almost would sound arrogant, and I don't mean it that way, but if you've got someone that has a vision to lead, often times those who need leaders will see that and they'll tap that. And you'll end up in a position of leadership. I-I guess that's kind of my story.

Researcher: So what do you consider your most rewarding experience as, as a principal?

Jerry: I think, even as an educator in general, the most rewarding experience is when we see success stories and progress. I remember as a student teacher, I student taught in Borrow County, Annie Bain was my supervising teacher. And of course I was a young man at the time, and she told me, she said ... well actually she said "In this field where the greatest reward is you're not really gonna see them in the beginning." She says "It's like a seed you planted, and sometimes it's not five, ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years later, that you really have a sense o-o-of fulfillment, because you can see the good things that are coming out of the kids that you had just a small deposit into their lives." And so, I felt that to be true, but when you look back, I've got this former student of mine, and I won't take any credit for his success cause he was probably the smartest kid I've ever had in my class. I'm not even gonna say I taught him. Um, but I noticed the other day that he had on his doctor's coat, and he's becoming ... his dad's a, uh, a surgeon and, and it looks like he's gonna follow his dad's footsteps. He's probably about the best example because he ... a lot of kids have success just stacked in their favor. But when you see a kid maybe that the success isn't quite as stacked in their favor, and then you look back and see ... Look he's gonna make it. Look he's gonna make something of himself. He's gonna be a pillar of his community. That is one of the most rewarding experiences I think an educator can have. Um, and sometimes it's not as tangible as maybe other careers, but, um, my most ... I don't know if you wanted a specific example, but generally speaking I would just say that the most rewarding

thing is to see success of the students.

Researcher: What do you consider your most challenging experience, or experiences, as principal?

Jerry: I definitely think that answer is probably not the same as it would have been had you asked me ten years ago, cause I think the challenges that educators face, um, are not necessarily the same today as they were ten years, fifteen, or twenty years ago. So, the greatest challenges that I-I faced I think is to keep a vision of moving forward, and producing the success for kids, in an environment where you have so many moving pieces. And, sometimes so many agendas, whether it's that of parents, that of teachers, that of students, that of district office folks. There's a lot of different pieces moving, and this is not a huge school, there's schools that are bigger .Um, but even in just this size school, you've got, um, nearly 800 children, um, about 80 staff members, um, and you can figure out ... do the math how many parents we have. And trying to cast a vision, and then keep it moving in that direction without getting bogged down the minutiae of whether it be a report that's due here, or it be a student who's melting down there, that's the day-to-day stuff that's the minutiae. I will tell you, um, I thought that Monday of this week was particularly challenging then. I can remember going home feeling, feeling the weight of Monday on me, and, uh, I can remember my wife telling me, "You need to stop wearing it home."  
(laughs) It was good advice, she was right. Um, but I think that's the biggest challenge, just because you know what you wanna do, and you can come into school and have ... um, I'm going to check off these few things off my to-do-list, and not touch them, because you get to school and there are just other things that vie for and demand your attention. I think that's challenging.

Researcher: So, now we're going to get into, um, some specific types of experiences. And those are behavioral, environmental and personal experiences. So, the first question is, describe your

behavioral experiences. Things like levels of success, productivity, self-evaluation, et cetera. with school improvement under No Child Left Behind.

Jerry: My behavior?

Researcher: Your behavioral experiences as a leader with school improvement under No Child Left Behind.

Jerry: Um, the thing about NCLB is it, uh, forced schools and educators to become cognizant of sub-groups. Prior to that, it was easier for a school to rest on its' laurels so to speak, because their ... overall their average might look pretty good. Um, might even be showing growth, but No Child Left Behind it takes layers of and says, "Okay, maybe, but now how's your English Language Learners doing? How are your African Americans doing? How are your economically disadvantaged students doing? How are your SWD doing?" And so, when you put those sub-groups out on a table all by themselves, all of a sudden realize, "Oh wow. The school might have looked nice but look at the sub-group and how they're struggling." And so, No Child Left Behind forces us to look at sub-groups, and so our behavior responds to those findings. Um, so, the behavior that I would say, uh, I've had to ... what I've had to do is ... and any educator in this era, is to be cognizant of data, um, cognizant of progress or lack thereof. Uh, to be cognizant of progress of specific sub-groups and then to think about, "Is there something I can do to that targets that sub-group?" Because it sometimes is easier to think of improvement initiatives that look very good on paper and sound good in conversation, but may not necessarily target a particular sub-group. And that's to me a harder thing to do, is to know how can I really impact that real specific portion of my population. So, um, I think that's the behavior that have come as a result of the No Child Left Behind, is knowing that we're looking at data, and we're

thinking about what are our interventions, our initiatives, gonna be that'll address the needs of the specific sub-group.

Researcher: So, now describe environmental experiences. Such as social and physical components related to school improvement under No Child Left Behind?

Jerry: Yeah, I think it, since I've been in administration, and I would hope that was even before then. It's always been paramount importance that we have a safe environment and an atmosphere that is, um, pleasant and conducive to learning. So, I don't know that, um, No Child Left Behind necessarily changed the fact that that was our goal. Um, I do know that we are now ... Um, when I left to go to the private sector, it was, uh, after No Child Left Behind, but I'd never heard of CCRPI when I left. I found out about the CCRPIs when I got here and got back into public. It was amazing how much in three years had evolved. Uh, but I know now that our climate is a part of our rating, that it's not just us trying to have a good climate, it's also that people are gonna look and see what our rating is now. Um, and so, you have to be cognizant of the image that you're projecting. I-I will tell you, and I've always tried to have a, what I would describe as a marketing approach to, to environment, and the school. And what I mean by that is if you take the approach that I have to market my school because these parents don't have to send their children here, um, they have options, and of course in my district that's especially true, they have options within the district but they also, some of them, can go, "Well, I'll take my children over to a private school." And so, I thought that, um, with the environment, I'm trying to market our school in the sense that parents come to believe, "That is a nice place to be. That's a place I'd want my kid to be." The object in the front lobby, one reason it's there, is I wanted it to create an aura in this building of, um, high-end, if you will. And, uh, w-we right now have some folks working on trying to get some art brought into our school to put up. To continue to foster that

feel, cause environment matters and people out there are now gonna be judging us. Uh, and they're gonna be judging us through surveys that they can complete, um, perception surveys, and quite frankly even the ... just the anecdotal, um ... day-to-day what they're saying at the ball park to people about their child's school. Our behavior is certainly impacted by this, "You've gotta have an environment that is conducive to learning and now people are gonna score you."

Researcher: So, describe personal experiences. Like emotional, um, and self -efficacy pieces, uh, associated with school improvement under No Child Left Behind.

Jerry: Yeah. I feel like I can answer these questions real easily, I'm not so sure I'm always answering it specific to the era. Um, I guess the No Child Left Behind started the look at sub-groups, and maybe that's where a lot of this stems from. So, let me just speak in general how I might personally and emotionally be affected by this. Um, I think when you're the leader in a building, uh, you love that when things are going well, and people coming and patting you on the back, and uh, yeah. (laughs) Even if it shouldn't be credited to me. Might just be a great team in 3rd grade, you know, or it might be off that great committee working on that initiative. And that they come in and think it's the principal, but you know what else they think is the principal? Is when things aren't going well. And you should learn, as a principal, that you ... be careful, don't glory too much in taking credit for the things that are going well because, if you do that, you're also gonna have to take a lot of the blame for the things that aren't going well. And so I think you learn to balance things and say when things are going really well, I've got a team here that's helping to make things go well, but then when things aren't going well, I have to be careful, like my wife told me, "you can't wear that on one of your shoulders cause some of that you don't have any control over." Um, I don't think that's a bad thing. I think, if you do sense a little bit of personal responsibility for how things go, it'll create a sense of urgency that you won't be able to

rest until things are fixed, even if you think, "Well, that's not really my fault," maybe not but can you do anything about it to fix it. And so I think having that investment uh emotionally that says, "mm-hmm (affirmative) that's gonna be on me," and uh, I, I don't like for these to not go well, and it to be on me. Erm, uh and so I'm gonna look for ways to fix things, I'm gonna look for ways to respond to concerns, um, you know I had some parents in here...was it Tuesday or Wednesday? Today is Thursday, so it was Tuesday. Good parents and great kids, um respected in the community, and- and always have been very gracious to me. Er, but quite frankly they came into share disappointment, and that was kinda hard for me, um and yeah that's a part of what we're in this for, and I thank them for sharing their concerns and and er I tried to explain to them as best I could without sounding defensive about why we had done what we did. Um but yeah, that- that's an emotional thing sometimes when you feel- this is somebody that you've got good rapport with, this is someone that I'd like to think of even as- I mean I don't hang out with them on the weekends but I would call them by first name when I see them in the community, that kind of thing. But then for them to come in and him to look at me like I'm looking at you right now and say, "I'm just disappointed that that you did X, Y or Z, or didn't do X, Y or Z." There's some emotional involvement there. And erm it's not necessarily school improvement, that specific example is tied to uh an incident from our playground, erm, but still the emotional involvement is here, you, I- I can't detach myself completely emotionally from what I do professionally. And yet I do tell teachers all the time and and try to do it myself, but, as a professional I don't wanna wear my emotions in here, I wanna face- and and I told a teacher recently after her TEKS observation. I said, I didn't put this in the platform, I shared it um through an email. I said, "Work on your poker face," you need a little bit better poker face cause you're a team leader and you go into your team meeting with your rainy day face, and it affects

the whole environment in there (laughs). So yes we're emotionally invested, and yes we feel those things, but we have to also be professionals and know how to express those at the right place, at the right time. Anyway, I'm probably rambling at this point, you're gracious for letting me ramble. I feel sorry for whoever's gonna transcribe this. (laughs)

Researcher: So, when you think back to all these experiences in the specifics that you just described under No Child Left Behind, how did these experiences impact you as a school leader, and your confidence leading school improvement?

Jerry: I think confidence, for me, confidence er really is bolstered when you see growth, when you see success, and I've really enjoyed some of that the last few years. I've enjoyed seeing some success and some growth and some progress that's made us real proud. Erm, and so certainly confidence comes from that, sort of like if you win the state championships, it's hard for people to criticize your coaching style right. But, most recently I've seen that, last year, er, we weren't as strong in our performance as I would like to be and so then you think, "okay, mm hmm (affirmative)." But do you know what, you can't let that cost you your mojo, because you're not going to bat a 1000, and there are going to be uh, years- you, you got different groups of kids coming through, so your cohort of kids that are coming through is constantly changing quite frankly in this setting, erm, half those kids change every year, is that right, cause we only have two grade levels that really get growth measured in our school. And so about half those are turning over every year. Erm, you'd like to think that every kid would be benefited equally by whatever great things that it is you're doing in your school, and yet when you talk about a subgroup of er er, group of kids, a 100 kids in a grade level, 120 kids in a grade level, you move half of those out, that's a pretty significant change to your sample pool. And so we have to keep that in mind also, not to use as an excuse, but to realize you're not going to bat a 1000, so if you have

a year when it's not as good as you'd like it to have been, I thought- our superintendent sent an email after our CCRPI scores came out this week I thought, "Hit the nail on the head," and he did say you know we could start pointing fingers at the different excuses, or the different reasons why maybe that our kids don't perform as high as we'd like them to. But we're really more interested in, "What are we going to do to go forward from this point to make sure that we do what we can do now to grow them?" And I think that's what- when I give myself a pep rally, you know when I'm talking self-talk (laughs), I remind myself, "What am I going to do now, alright, I can't do anything about last year it is in the books, but what are we going to do now going forward?"

Researcher: So now moving to ESSA, describe some behavioral experiences once again, levels of success, productivity, self-evaluation, with school improvement under ESSA?

Jerry: So, what am I doing differently now in ESSA from No Child Left Behind, honestly I can't tell you that there's a whole lot of differences in the way I approach school improvement. The way I've been trained and seen others model school improvement is you have to know what the data says is your strengths, you have to know what the data says is your weakness', and then you have to have a plan for addressing those weaknesses. You can enjoy the strengths, but then get over it, and start looking at what you're going to do to address the weaknesses. And so that's generally been my approach. You gotta have a strategic plan for how you're going forward, how you're gonna grow the business, and how you're gonna meet the bottom line and er, er, what's the model I think it is, the plan do check act. That came out of a business, the business world, but it applies in what we do here also.

Researcher: So along the same lines, describe your environmental experiences, so environmental mean- meaning social and physical components etc, with school improvement under ESSA?

Jerry: Again I'll just tell ya that I sense the same, I'll use the word pressure, because it's the first word that came to my mind. I sense the same pressure, that, we- it's on us to foster an environment in this building where children are confident and comfortable to engage in the learning process where parents feel confident to leave their children. And know that they're gonna be taken care of. I haven't personally sensed any kind of a big distinction in how we approach that from the No Child Left Behind until ESSA. I talked to a mother and father today, and I say this often, speaks to environment, and I assured them, I said, "You know my goal is that your daughter," she's a third grader, "My goal is that your daughter will be treated how I would want my daughter to be treated." Now I want my daughter to be corrected, I want her to be loved, and I want her dignity to be preserved. And I'm confident that's probably what you'd like for your daughter as well. That's speaks to environment and that hasn't changed for me since the NCLB.

Researcher: And same thing... personal experiences, personal experiences being emotional and self-efficacy pieces, associated with school improvement under ESSA.

Jerry: My approach to leadership and to school improvement is a part of what I have always known since I entered administration.

Researcher: And how did these particular experiences associated with ESSA impact you in your confidence leading school improvement?

Jerry: When you talk about the confidence of someone, maybe me in particular, obviously I- there's nothing probably more pathetic than someone that has false confidence, someone who doesn't know what they don't know. But I think, that there's a lot to me said for engendering\ confidence in someone when people who are looking over them, can say, "I like what you've done with that." Or maybe say, "here's an area I want you to focus on but I really am proud of

what we see over here." I think a lot of that confidence comes if you know that the people that you're working for, have confidence in you. If I didn't think that the people I worked for had confidence in me, I wouldn't have confidence in my own- that's a whole lot like authority, it goes through a pipeline if you will like a chain of command. And so I have a boss that I work for and I want to be sure to earn his confidence and if I have his confidence, it helps me to be confident. If I don't have his confidence, then that breeds insecurity in my leadership, and I would say- I keep that in mind too, as I work with teachers, I just finished our- I've got one more teacher to go but we're almost done with first round of formative with TKES. And by large, we've got some really good teachers in our school, they're a lot like their principal, in that they're not perfect. But we've got pretty good teachers. It is not natural for me to just go pin flowers on people, and I've always benefited from having people that I work with remind me, "Hey it's time to take chocolate to the teachers," you know. But I have tried to be cognizant even in this round of TKES observations, that while I may have provided some suggestions for things to think about to get better, I also was trying to be cognizant- I wanna make sure not to deflate them, I wanna make sure that they receive my feedback and from that they can take, "Oh, Mr. Jerry has confidence in me, Mr Jerry is proud to have me in his building." And I think if you do that for people, and I- again I don't wanna breed false confidence, and I think you have to be real if there is someone that doesn't need to be confident, you need to be able to address that to help them have reason to be confident. I'm saying that to say that I uh, I personally, I've got people that I work for that I, too, look to them to kind of see 'should I be confident here' or am I way off the reservation. But I also see that for the people I work with here in the building, that I have an opportunity to impact their confidence. So it's not to be so much tied to the change from NCLB to ESSA, I'm gonna be doing the stuff that I know how to do, and I'm confident in what I'm doing, but I'm really

confident when I sense that I have confidence from those that I'm working for.

Researcher: So how do you perceive the commonalities and differences associated with NCLB and ESSA?

Jerry: Let me see if I can think about what is the big distinction between them. Again, I know that No Child Left Behind forced us to disaggregate the data, we're still disaggregating the data., No Child Left Behind put in place a high level of testing and assessment for the purpose of accountability, quite frankly, we're still in an environment of high stakes tests, and in fact that's increasing or at least trying er- there's a move to move that accountability piece, as you know, to merit pay, to certificate renewal, so really the high stakes pieces probably increased even more, I don't- I don't know if that's necessarily tied to ESSA as much as it may just be a Georgia thing, but it may be part of Georgia's response to ESSA.

Researcher: So describe a specific time when you have felt very successful with school improvement.

Jerry: Well again, in the environment that we work in, often times, fair or not, we're measured by the growth of our kids- well that is fair, we want kids to grow, but I was gonna say the CCPRI score even. And so I did take a lot of pride in that our school seemed to be a flagship if you will, in the literacy piece for the district, and I'll be frank with you, I don't think of myself as a super smart elementary educator., but I've got some super smart people that I, I work with including our instructional coach. She's the one who shared with me after we'd seen this literacy proposal the program that we're now doing across the district, she said, "I think this is what we need to get over our arrows aligned." I'll talk to you a little more about that. I relied on her expertise, and she is an expert, I would call her, she wouldn't, but I'll call her an expert in in early literacy, and so we jumped in full bore with it and she shared this a little bit in our meeting recently, where she

talked about the timeline but we jumped in full bore thinking it was going to be a district initiative. And we really did not want to wait till mid-year, come now everyone its January, now we're going to do this. We thought we'd just start from the beginning. And at the end of the year, we did see signs of good growth with our children's reading levels and our literacy scores. And it was very encouraging, it was very gratifying and then we have continued to enjoy success with our children's literacy. I will tell you and you didn't ask this, when it came to our school, they had the second lowest scores in the district and I don't think many people realize that, because my school kinda has a reputation and a rich heritage and people in the community think my school is that school. But, it had the second lowest scores in the elementary in the district at the time. And so it was very gratifying to see the work from our literacy- and I contribute a lot to that, moving our kids in a more positive direction, in fact, it was my third year here, which was the second year of full implementation of the literacy program. That we had the maximum number of progress points that our school could earn, at the time it was 40. And we had all 40 points in the progress category on the CCPRI. And I- maybe that is it, when we saw that kind of success in our kids' growth and progress, we all celebrated.

Researcher: So describe a time when you felt unsuccessful with school improvement.

Jerry: You know, one of the things that we've looked at- I could give you two or three examples. It's hard for me to say the most, but maybe what just comes to my mind. We wanted to see an improvement in specifically our African American boys' behavior. And so one of the things we've talked about is the need for mentors who could come in and work with some of our boys and help be an influence. It feels like now I'm in my fifth year at my school, all we've done is talk about that. And that is a constant source of frustration and a sense of failure I guess on my part, cause I do think if I just grabbed that bull by the horns, I could get that thing off the

ground and I think I could quite frankly, but I haven't had time, and maybe I should, I mean, that's an excuse to make that a priority. I can't tell you how pleased I was today to see an email from our superintendent, announcing someone from the district level, and who's been charged with, uh, really bolstering the mentoring program. I was like, "Yes." (laughing) 'Cause I haven't been able to do that, and so, maybe there's an area that I would say that we've not been successful in. I would say also the area of our English Language Learners, albeit I- I will tell you that the only groups that got the green and yellow stars on the progress, uh, report for CCRPI this time, but I always feel like that there's more that I wanna be able to do for our English Language Learners. We don't have as high a percentage in our school as some of the others, but one out of four kids in our school is an English Language Learner. And so, it is a significant population, and I always wanna make sure that we're doing something effective for them, and I don't know that I've ever felt like that I've been great at zeroing in, and getting that population where they need to be. I do have some good folks here who are good at it, though. And I'm thankful for people like GH and AA, who ... AA was one of our top performers, when we looked at growth models recently, and we saw that, uh, I'm glad she's working with my ESOL kids. So we've got some good folks working with them. But anyway.

Researcher: So how do you think successes or challenges with school improvement impact you as a leader?

Jerry: Well, I do think that successes ought to, um, lend some credibility, that, uh, you know, I like to listen to successful people, because I think, "Well, they must know what they're talking about." Um. And so, the successes, I think, give you a sense of credibility and, or anyone for that matter. If I've seen someone's been successful, then well, that gives some credibility in my eyes,

'cause I know she's done some things, and there's some successes to speak to it. Was the question about successes only, or about the failures also?

Researcher: Both.

Jerry: Oh. And then the failures. Nobody wants to, uh, read a book about how to do something by someone who's failed to do it, right? "How to keep your marriage intact." By a guy who's on his third wife, right? So if you've failed at things, it does- it'll- it'll take a hit on your own sense of competence, your own sense of credibility, um, and rightly so. Rightly so. If you're (laughs) If you're gonna be credible, show me some results. What was it, I heard something, you maybe heard this before, somebody said, uh, "In God we trust. All else bring data." All others must bring data. Yeah. So if you don't have any data to show me of how you've been successful, I don't know, don't come in here and tell me about how, uh, incredible you are, until I can see some results.

Researcher: So how could school improvement planning be designed and framed to better support, um, leaders at the school level?

Jerry: Huh. Well, I don't know. So you- sometimes you only know what you know. Well, always you only know what you know, and what I know right now in my district, is there are some good things in place, I think, to support leaders in the school improvement planning process, uh, beginning with the leadership summit. Especially, I like how we framed it this last year, uh, this last spring, getting ready for this year, because we're really- we're very deliberate in getting our ducks in a row in advance. And I know that was so that we could pull down some federal monies in a more timely manner. So what could better support leaders, and put them in a better position? Um. Well, let me just speak generally then. I think that if a leader is going to be effective in school improvement, he needs to know a clear articulation of what's expected. Um. I

think, uh, support through the, um, applications that oftentimes, uh ... this year wasn't as bad, but uh, the previous year, we had, uh, what was it? 64, or 78, or 82. It was a huge document that we completed (laughs) for the, uh, school improvement template, and so when- when a principal gets a document, a template like that, and asked to complete it...But if I'm working on it over here, and another principal is working on it across town, we may be approaching it completely differently, both thinking we're doing it correctly. I think whatever can be done to help principals be synchronized in their effort, and when it's appropriate. And I think there are, many times it's appropriate. I loved the ... we- we met recently, and the principals had the opportunity to meet for two hours before the rest of the meeting came in. I feel like I gleaned good stuff from that, because otherwise, you do ... they say, "We don't want silos, you know, we want a honeycomb. We wanna be kinda connected." But if you never sit down and hear what they're doing, or have a chance to ask them questions about what they're doing, or if people start feeling threatened if you ask questions, then it's hard to get that honeycomb effect. And so, I think to support leaders in school improvement process, we need to make it okay that we're gonna talk together, we're gonna learn from each other, we're gonna support each other, especially through the things that we have in common. If it's a common template, or common goals, what are you doing? Maybe I could do that. How did you help your ELLs? Have you been successful at your- with your, uh, African-American boys? That's to me, I really appreciate and benefit from that.

Researcher: So reflecting on your experiences as a principal, what advice would you give to a new principal, as he or she began to work with accountability and school improvement?

Jerry: I think some of the best advice I would give is some I received from the principal who hired me, back in the middle school, in Colen. He said, "Jerry, when you get ready to make a decision," He said, "Make sure you've gathered all the relevant information from the people

who know, then consider what is the best thing you can do for the kids that you're charged to serve, and make your decision that way." He says, "If you do that, you'll sleep good at night. If you've done what's in the best interest of kids, and you've done it with the right information, then if someone wants to come and criticize your decision, you can defend your decision a whole lot easier, when you've had the input of the people who know, and the people who are affected, and you can say, "Look this is what's best for kids." People can't argue with that. Um. (laughs) I've used that sometimes with parents that might be upset about something that, uh, well, we do it because it helps make sure that the children are safe. I'm sure you want us to keep the children safe, don't you? No one can argue with that. Um. But I think, if I had one piece of advice, I'd give that. Make sure you're soliciting the information from the people. For example, here, I'm not gonna go make some big decision about our literacy program until I've talked to my literacy expert, which is my instructional coach. I had a teacher today in here, and she was describing something that was happening with her grade level. She's a grade level leader, and she was describing what's happening there in her grade level's, uh, skill group time. And what she described sounded awful. (laughs) And I had no idea it was going on, and I thought, "That can't be right. That's not how we've done it." But even in that setting, I wasn't willing to just say, "Okay. Do that." When she left, I said, "Let me check, and we'll get back with you." And I feel like I know the answer, but I still went to my coach, and I said, "Coach." which by the way, she'd already been to the coach. The coach is already ready to tell me, "Do you know what they were doing?" I said, "Yes. She just left my office." She said, "They can't do that." I said, "I know." that's what I was thinking, but I know that I've got someone I can go to, and I get good information before we make decisions, um, and I just think that's smart. Here's the thing. When you're the principal in the building, your head's gonna be on the chopping block if things don't

work well. So yeah, you get to make the decision, and I- I think that's important. If you're gonna put my head on the chopping block, let me make the decision. But if you're smart, you're gonna make your decision after you've heard from people who know stuff. So that's what I try to do.

And that's advice I'd give to a new leader.

Researcher: So looking ahead to the new accountability requirements under ESSA, how do you expect your leadership to change or develop over the next several years?

Jerry: Wraparound service is a big piece, that I didn't used to ever hear about, or the whole child piece. Even though we were looking at maybe- maybe then, and this is just an epiphany, maybe it is, No Child Left Behind forced us to look at disaggregated, uh, data, so we're looking at subgroups. ESSA now is saying, "Okay. That's your subgroup, but now, can you see that child as an individual?" He is a member of a subgroup, but he's also an individual with unique needs, and unique challenges. Um. And so, that- that may be, uh, a way of making a distinction. And certainly, I can speak to that piece. Um. We have children in our building who are upset. They're angry. Uh. They haven't seen their father in a long time, uh, he's in jail, or beat up my momma last night. That's not just stuff on TV. That's in reality, and I noticed it in the other schools too. And so, a child, um, you know, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs applies to children, and if a child is all emotionally laden about challenges at home, it's difficult for him to care about fractions. It's difficult for him to care about a subject and a predicate. Um. And so, the wraparound is an essential part of being able to move these children into a position where they can engage in the learning process, because as long as their minds are vexed and heavy with, um, needs that aren't being met, whether it'd be their, um, social emotional needs, or maybe physical needs, uh, you know, one of the great things that I feel like that our counselor is helping lead here this year is, uh, the opening of a family center, is what we generally call it. I think they're trying to come up

with a fancier name than that, but it's because we know we have kids that need a toothbrush. We know we have kids that don't have a coat to wear when the weather gets cold. And uh, those are needs that have to be met, and some might say, well that's the parents' responsibility. Yeah. It is. But we're charged with educating the kid. So if the parent's not meeting their responsibility, we're still charged with educating the kid. So the wraparound piece says we're gonna do anything that we can do, to help meet that part, so that we can move the child into a position to learn.

Researcher: So we've covered a lot of ground, and thank you so much for meeting with me today.

Jerry: Well, pleased to do it.

Researcher: What else do you think would be important for me to know about your experiences with school improvement?

Jerry: No. But I'll tell you something. You didn't-, I wasn't hoping you'd ask anything, um, but if I would to just be candid about school improvement, I remember, first of all, I never took a class that I recall, in my undergraduate program, or in my, I've got a master's degree, and I almost have a doctorate degree. I don't think I've ever taken a class in school improvement. Um... if I have, I don't remember it. And so, when I was an assistant principal at the middle school, my first public school administrative experience, um, I don't remember there being a whole lot, to be honest with you. I'm sure the principal had a school improvement plan. I'm sure he did. I don't remember ever serving on a committee, and looking at the data about it. I don't. Now, that was, um, I have to do the math. Uh. Four plus three is seven, uh, plus three is ten. That would've been 12 years ago. Um. Then, when they made me the principal of an elementary school in the same district, nobody that I recall said, "Okay, we're gonna give you a crash course, any course in school improvement." And yet, there was an expectation that you're supposed to

lead school improvement in your school. (laughs) And so, um, I will tell you again. I benefited, at that point, my, uh, the first year I was there, I don't know what I did. Um. it was a great year, and I enjoyed it, and the kids were great, and (laughs) it was great, but I can't tell you what I did for school improvement that year. I had an assistant principal that had been a teacher in that school, and I just tapped him to be my assistant. He's a great guy, still assistant principal there today, but he and I smiled a lot, and were nice to people, and we supported our teachers. I don't remember much about school improvement. But the next year, I had a new assistant principal, and that was the district's doing. They put somebody with me, and she was sharp. She had been a high school principal, and that ... she's been a high school principal in Borrow County. For whatever reason, she ended up leaving that, and she ended up in our district, but she's so smart, and knew a lot about school improvement, and so, um, she kind of helped lead that, and uh, I remember, uh, I worked with her then for two years, then I left there to go to the private school in Coothil, and I can remember calling, her name's TG. I'll give her credit. And T, by the way, has retired twice, and she's followed me once or twice, 'cause she ended up at the private school that I was at also, at after she retired, to come teach math, and then she became the principal when I left, but now she's at the career academy, in Borrow County. But uh, I remember calling T, and saying, "T, that template you were using, when we would have our school improvement meetings?" And when we did a summer retreat with our leadership team, and T would lead it, and I would support it. Um. And so I felt like that I learned more just working with smart people who knew how to look at data, and it's not really rocket science. Once you kinda get it down, the fact that ... just look and see what the data tells you, and then make a series of possible action steps that you could take, that would actually impact. I remember she sent me the "5 Whys" form. She sent me the fish bone diagram. You've probably seen that before too, the fish bone

diagram? And so, I- I remember leading that process then at Excel, and I'll be honest with, Excel, when I went there, I don't know that they've ever gone through that process before, but we were having a SACS visit, my first year at Excel. And so, we had to have something to show them about school improvement. (laughs) Um. But I took T's stuff, and I worked with that, um, and then of course, when I came here, I felt like, you know, I had an opportunity to get a little bit of experience in developing school improvement. I will say, to Coonhil's credit, that they were very big on the Deming Model. That was where Dr. Title was superintendent, and she's still there, and I remember hearing her talk about plan, do, check, act, but we- we constantly heard that cycle of plan, do, check, act. Now, do it again. (laughs) So, um, I guess if I were sharing final parting thoughts, it is that maybe it would be good, especially if you're in a leadership program, to have a course on school improvement, and um, and when you tap someone to be your new principal, or to be your new assistant principal, with those assistant principals, if they're not familiar with it, groom them in that school improvement process, and what that's supposed to look like, and if it's a principal that hasn't been groomed, 'cause sometimes, people are tapped to be a principal, and they weren't an assistant principal. They may have come out of classroom. I don't know if that happens a lot, but um, I think it's important that you not just assume that someone who is a great teacher, someone who is good with people, and I guess I'm- I thought of myself as a great teacher, and I like to think of myself as being good with people, but I didn't have a vast experience in school improvement. So maybe there's an assumption that sometimes district leadership might make about principals, that uh, it would not be a fair assumption. Anyway, that was off the top of my head too.

Researcher: Well, thank you so much.

Jerry: I wish I had time to think in advance about this stuff, I would've tried to sound smarter.