

8-2016

Leading Growth: A Grounded Theory Study of Superintendent Strategies to Support Student Growth

Terry L. Ward

St. John Fisher College, tlw07852@students.sjfc.edu

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ward, Terry L., "Leading Growth: A Grounded Theory Study of Superintendent Strategies to Support Student Growth" (2016). *Education Doctoral*. Paper 279.

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/279 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Leading Growth: A Grounded Theory Study of Superintendent Strategies to Support Student Growth

Abstract

Strong leadership in any organization is critical to success. Research suggests school superintendent leadership can have positive outcomes on student learning. Until recently, the impact of school superintendents have been thought to be too indirect or complex to study. This study explores school superintendent leaders who create school-wide systems that promote student growth. This research examines the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of superintendents that lead to student growth. Using a grounded theory methodology, the author examined new and emerging ideas to promote student growth. This study utilized four steps in data collection and analysis: (a) initial coding, (b) category development, (c) axial coding, and (d) theoretical coding. The final step created a new emerging theory entitled leadership for student growth. The results of this study can be used to inform superintendent leaders about their professional practice. The scope of the research included 15 school superintendent leaders in the OCM BOCES, as well as the OHM BOCES. The superintendent sample included suburban and rural school district superintendents. The data collection process included one-on-one interviews with 15 school superintendents. The results of the research resulted in three categories and 10 themes that emerged from the data. The first category, trust, incorporated the two themes of: (a) critical conversations, and (b) distributive leadership. The second category, balanced data system, incorporated the theme of the use of multiple data points. The final category, systems thinking, incorporated three themes of: (a) strategic planning, (b) explicit professional development, and (c) stimulating a learning culture. This research resulted in the emerging theory of leadership for student growth. The recommendations include school superintendents who develop trust, a balanced data system, and think systematically will likely create conditions for each student to reach his or her full potential.

Degree Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department

Executive Leadership

First Supervisor

Theresa L. Pulos

Subject Categories

Education

Leading Growth:
A Grounded Theory Study of Superintendent Strategies to Support Student Growth

By

Terry L. Ward

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Theresa L. Pulos

Committee Member

Dr. Dean Goewey

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

August 2016

Copyright by
Terry L. Ward
2016

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Lauren, and kids, Sadie, Lindy, and Anson, who have been supportive throughout the entire process. They are truly amazing with their unconditional love and support. To my mom, who taught me hard work, dedication, and persistence always pay off.

To the people who helped me along the way, I thank all of you. Dr. Donald DeJohn for believing I could achieve this milestone. Dr. Naomi Ludwig for her support and words of encouragement. Mr. Matt Riley, my executive mentor, for providing me authentic leadership opportunities. All of my wonderful professors at St. John Fisher College, you have taught me many lessons in the classroom and about life. Especially, I'd like to thank my advisor, Dr. Kim VanDerLinden, for her words of wisdom and encouragement. Also, I'd like to thank our site director, Dr. C. Michael Robinson, for his leadership within our program. Likewise, I'd like to thank my dissertation committee member, Dr. Dean Goewey, for his tenacious support. Last, I'd like to show my gratitude to Dr. Theresa L. Pulos, my dissertation chair. She has taught me how to think, critically analyze, and help me realize that words matter when writing and speaking. Dr. Pulos was always there for me throughout the entire process. I cannot thank her enough for sharing with me her time, devotion, expertise, and persistence.

Finally, I'd like to thank my cohort members for sharing their journey with me. I am truly a better person as a result of knowing all of you. Especially, I'd like thank my current group members, Dr. Elizabeth Keida, Mrs. Leah Deasy, and Mr. Galen Gomes for

their support and encouragement along the way. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my fallen team member, Mrs. Winnie Olmstead. May you rest in peace.

Biographical Sketch

Terry L. Ward is currently the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Pupil Personnel Services in the Cazenovia Central School District. Mr. Ward attended the State University of New York at Cortland from 1993 to 1996 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. He attended Syracuse University from 1997 to 1998 and graduated with a Master of Sciences degree in Special Education. In 2003, Mr. Ward received his Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Administration from the State University of New York at Oswego. He came to St. John Fisher College in the summer 2013 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mr. Ward pursued his research in school superintendent leadership regarding student growth under the direction of Dr. Theresa L. Pulos and Dr. Dean Goewey and received the Ed.D. degree in 2016.

Abstract

Strong leadership in any organization is critical to success. Research suggests school superintendent leadership can have positive outcomes on student learning. Until recently, the impact of school superintendents have been thought to be too indirect or complex to study. This study explores school superintendent leaders who create school-wide systems that promote student growth. This research examines the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of superintendents that lead to student growth.

Using a grounded theory methodology, the author examined new and emerging ideas to promote student growth. This study utilized four steps in data collection and analysis: (a) initial coding, (b) category development, (c) axial coding, and (d) theoretical coding. The final step created a new emerging theory entitled *leadership for student growth*. The results of this study can be used to inform superintendent leaders about their professional practice.

The scope of the research included 15 school superintendent leaders in the OCM BOCES, as well as the OHM BOCES. The superintendent sample included suburban and rural school district superintendents. The data collection process included one-on-one interviews with 15 school superintendents.

The results of the research resulted in three categories and 10 themes that emerged from the data. The first category, trust, incorporated the two themes of: (a) critical conversations, and (b) distributive leadership. The second category, balanced data system, incorporated the theme of the use of multiple data points. The final

category, systems thinking, incorporated three themes of: (a) strategic planning, (b) explicit professional development, and (c) stimulating a learning culture. This research resulted in the emerging theory of *leadership for student growth*.

The recommendations include school superintendents who develop trust, a balanced data system, and think systematically will likely create conditions for each student to reach his or her full potential.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Biographical Sketch.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	viii
List of Tables.....	x
List of Figures.....	1
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Problem Statement.....	4
Conceptual Foundation.....	5
Statement of Purpose.....	8
Research Questions.....	8
Potential Significance of the Study.....	8
Definitions of Terms.....	9
Chapter Summary.....	10
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Review of the Literature.....	12
Chapter Summary.....	29
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology.....	31
Introduction.....	31

Research Context	32
Research Participants	33
Instruments Used in Data Collection	34
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis	36
Chapter Summary	39
Chapter 4: Results	41
Data Analysis and Findings	42
Summary	59
Chapter 5: Discussion	60
Introduction	60
Implications of Findings	63
Limitations	70
Recommendations	71
Conclusion	73
References	78
Appendix A	83
Appendix B	84
Appendix C	86

List of Tables

Item	Title	Page
Table 2.1	Results of Waters and Marzano's Research on Superintendent Responsibilities	14
Table 2.2	Characteristics of Admired Leaders: Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Characteristic	18
Table 2.3	Involvement in Change and Commitment to Change Scales	20
Table 2.4	Average Effect for Each of the Major Contributors of Learning	24
Table 4.1	Summary of Categories and Themes of Leadership for Student Growth	43

List of Figures

Item	Title	Page
Figure 5.1	Conceptual Theory of Leadership for Student Growth	64

Chapter 1: Introduction

Scholars agree that leadership is a key factor in the success of school districts (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Until recently, superintendent leadership has been considered too indirect or complex to study. Existing studies provide a perspective on the effects of specific policies and actions at the superintendent level; however, current research has not specifically focused on school superintendent leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004).

The effects of superintendent leadership on student learning are measured in three primary ways. The first way is with qualitative case studies, which are used to identify relationships with school superintendents and student growth (Leithwood et al., 2004). This research is typically conducted in high-performing school districts. This type of study produces large leadership-effect sizes on student learning and district culture. However, what is missing from these studies is external validity or generalizability.

The second type of research on superintendent leadership is the use of large-scale quantitative studies (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). A review of 48 quantitative superintendent leadership studies concludes that superintendent leadership effect on student growth is small but educationally significant (Heck & Hallinger, 1998). For example, while superintendent leadership accounts for approximately 5% in the variation in student learning, it accounts for 25% of the total variation in student learning (Creemers & Reezigt, 1996).

Finally, large-scale quantitative meta-analytic studies have been employed as a research method on superintendent leadership. Marzano (2006) identified responsibilities, characteristics, or actions and calculated an effect size on student achievement. The understanding of effect size conclusions must be considered with caution because there should be a greater understanding of cause and effect relationships (Leithwood et al., 2004). This guides the analysis of the effects of superintendent leadership on student learning.

Superintendent leaders have considerable influence on student growth. However, there is a dearth of research in this area. Therefore, there should be more research on how successful leaders create conditions within their school districts to promote student growth (Heck & Hallinger, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004). This qualitative grounded theory study focuses on the common characteristics of superintendent leaders who create conditions that promote student growth. To provide context for this study, it is imperative the researcher examines the history and current political context of the school superintendency.

Successful superintendent leaders remain flexible and respond to their current contexts (Leithwood et al., 2004). Since *A Nation at Risk* (1983), there have been several legislative actions to improve American education. In 1965, federal law Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Act (EASA) incentivized states to pay particular attention to underachieving students (McDonnell, 2005). One billion dollars were distributed to provide EASA-related services to students in need of remediation (Thomas & Brady, 2005). In 1988, President George Bush amended Title 1 to require states to measure achievement levels of economically disadvantaged children (Thomas & Brady, 2005). In

the 1990s, Dianne Ravitch, Assistant Secretary of the United States Department of Education (USDE), further emphasized the idea of school accountability based on student performance (Wilder, Jacobsen, & Rothstein, 2008). As a result, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) tied student performance to school district accountability. By the 2005-06 school year, NCLB required every state to assess all students in Grades 3-8 in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics (Wilder et al., 2008). The primary goal of NCLB was that, by 2015, all students would reach proficiency in ELA and math. Accountability targets, referred to as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were based on the percentage of students in various subgroups reaching proficiency (Porter & Polikoff, 2007). Despite the United States focus on school accountability, evidence of student growth remains limited (Dunn, Burman, & Beattie, 2014).

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2005), there is growing interest in using an alternative approach, such as growth models, to improve student outcomes. Growth models include definitions, variables, and rules that summarize student performance over time (Betebenner & Linn, 2010). Growth models have, minimally, two student data points. They measure students', teachers', and schools' rates of progress over time (Castellano & Ho, 2012). Because learning is measured by changes in student achievement over time, interest in the process of student learning is an interest in academic growth (Betebenner & Linn, 2010). Using growth scores helps educators better measure student learning (Ehlert, Koedel, Parsons, & Podgursky., 2014).

Research identifies several leadership actions that have had a positive effect on growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney, Maras, & Herrington, 2013). For

example, teacher data conversations lead to greater student growth (Horn, Kane, & Wilson, 2015). In the business world, Kouzes and Posner (2012) identified 20 characteristics of exceptional leaders. The application to educational leaders includes building trust and rapport with staff, focusing on growth of students, celebrating successes, and emphasizing best instructional practices. In summary, leadership has a significant effect on creating conditions that promote student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013;). There should be more research on how successful leaders create conditions within their school districts to promote student growth (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Problem Statement

It is important to clearly identify superintendent leadership characteristics which create conditions that promote student growth. Heck and Hallinger's (2009) research indicates using growth data is superior to using achievement data during the school-improvement process. Leaders should create conditions that help identify which measures accurately assess student growth. Superintendents who create school-wide systems that focus on student learning will help all students reach their full potential (Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Blum-DeStefano, 2015). Research suggests facilitating and measuring student growth leads to better outcomes for students. Understanding the leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions superintendents possess, which help them remain committed to student growth, is the focus of this qualitative research.

Conceptual Foundation

Successful leadership practices create a school culture that embraces change (Honig, 2009). This change leads to long-range improvements in student achievement and growth. Superintendent leaders build the capacity of their school systems to embrace change in the school improvement process (Fullan, 2005). Consistent and sustainable leadership at the superintendent level is essential to create and implement change (Honig, 2009). Successful change implementation requires a plan. There are many theories about organizational change; however, Lewin's change theory has proven to be effective for over 60 years (Burns, 2004). Kurt Lewin's statement, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory," exemplifies his view that science and social change should be achieved all together (Burnes, 2004, p. 998). Lewin's change theory is a popular model for organizations that seek change (Wong-MingJi, 2013). Lewin's change theory is a three-step process that includes freezing, unfreezing, and refreezing (Shirley, 2013; Sullivan, 2009). The first stage, unfreezing, requires effort to change organizational thinking and create a sense of readiness for change. The second stage, transition, is when change begins to happen. The third stage, refreezing, involves discovering a preferred change and permanently making it a normal operating procedure. Without the process of refreezing, individuals or systems can revert to previously time-honored designs (Sullivan 2009). Lewin's work was based on the belief that as one solves social conflict, human conditions improve (Burnes, 2004). Field theory, group dynamics, action research and the three-step model of change are often treated as separate models. However, Lewin viewed them as an integrated approach with each dependent upon one

another. Furthermore, Lewin believed the aforementioned theories are necessary to understand and bring about transformation (Burnes, 2004).

Although Lewin's theory is a commonly used change-management theory, it may not always be appropriate. The theory is criticized for being too simplistic, quite linear, and framed from a static perspective. The research of Hinings and Greenwood (1989) is informative by illuminating the various ways in which organizational change can be delayed or derailed. Basing their model of transformation on Lewin's theory, they established that changing an organization is seldom a one-dimensional process of "unfreezing, transforming, refreezing" (Hinings & Greenwood, 1989). Another criticism of Lewin's work is that it only applies to small and insulated change projects, and it is not able to cause transformational change (Dawson, 1994; Dunphy & Stace, 1993; Harris, 1985). Furthermore, research from Lewin is seen as a top-down, management-driven approach to transformation, and it ignores the need for some situations to have a bottom-up solution (Dawson, 1994; Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). According to Hinings and Greenwood (1989), the change process in an organization is seldom a one-dimensional process. There may be multiple ways school superintendents set up systems that support student growth (Drago-Severson et al., 2015). Therefore, change theory's management-driven approach is too simplistic, linear, and static for this study. Other change theories, such as disruptive innovation have been attempted by school leaders to create positive change.

Christenson's (2006) disruptive innovation theory allows school leaders to put systems in place that maximize student growth opportunities. Disruptive innovation theory is based on challenging the status quo as well as supporting new ideas and

technologies. A key point in disruptive innovation theory is that students tend to learn in their own ways using different methods. Christenson and Horn (2008) concluded the one-size-fits-all approach to education is dysfunctional. Rather, school superintendents who put systems in place that create intrinsically motivated students will lead to greater student growth.

Change theory and disruptive theory have elements that help superintendent leaders manage the process of change in their school districts. However, being able to identify the leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions superintendents possess that help them remain committed to student growth requires a constant comparative method of inquiry.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory consists of flexible, methodical guidelines that enable researchers to focus on their data to produce theory. Grounded theory methodology delivers a set of procedures to allow the researcher to develop theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The goal of this grounded theory research is to develop an understanding of the leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions superintendents possess to demonstrate their commitment to student growth.

These procedures in grounded theory support the study of new and emerging areas of school superintendent influence on student growth. Current research has not specifically focused on school superintendent leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004). Grounded theory uncovers the beliefs and meanings that underlie action, examine behavior, and demonstrate how logic and emotion combine to influence a leader's response to events (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Using a grounded theory methodology, this

study assimilates the findings to generate a new theory of how the characteristics of rural and suburban school superintendents create conditions that promote student growth.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify superintendent leaders' characteristics, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate a commitment to student growth. Research suggests facilitating and measuring student growth leads to better outcomes for students (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Research suggests some school superintendents remain committed to student growth (Drago-Severson et al., 2015; Ehlert et al., 2014). For school superintendents who do remain committed to student growth, a greater understanding of their characteristics, behaviors, and actions is needed. This study identifies these superintendent characteristics specifically as they relate to the creation of conditions that promote student growth.

Research Questions

Superintendents create a school-wide system that supports all students reaching their full potential. This research study answers the following research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions do superintendents demonstrate that lead to student growth?
2. What are the school district conditions superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth?

Potential Significance of the Study

This grounded theory study focuses on superintendent leadership in the context of student growth and systems that promote student growth. Research indicates leaders positively affect student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013).

This grounded theory study identifies leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions of superintendent leaders who remain committed to student growth. Last, this study sought to identify a theory of how rural and suburban school superintendents can remain focused on student growth. This addresses the gap in the research and ultimately provides a theory upon which a superintendent leadership model can be developed to promote student growth.

Definitions of Terms

Achievement-Based Assessments (ABTs) – summative evaluations that estimate learning after a student is taught a specific curriculum (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Student Growth –describes the academic performance of a learner or group (a collection of learners) over two or more time points. The essential components of the definition are multiple data points and a time-based distinction between at least two data points (Castellano & Ho, 2012).

Adequate Yearly Progress (ADP) – measurement defined by the United States No Child Left Behind Act that allows the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to determine how every public school and school district in the country is performing academically according to results on standardized tests.

Growth Model – a collection of definitions, calculations, or rules that summarize student performance over two or more time points and supports interpretations about students, their classrooms, their educators, or their schools (CCSSC, 2005).

Student Growth Percentile – offers a normative foundation for the calculation and interpretation of growth. Although this model uses a relatively complex statistical

framework, the procedure is open-source, well described, and explainable with accessible, visually appealing graphics (Betebenner, 2009).

Chapter Summary

There are many school reform initiatives that affect school superintendents' decision making. There are superintendents who have a greater impact on student learning. However, it is difficult to measure how these superintendents have an impact on student learning (Chingos, Whitehurst, & Lindquist, 2014). In an effort to inform leaders in their professional practice, this study captures the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of superintendents who have positively impacted student learning. In addition, superintendent improvement strategies are a component of this qualitative grounded theory study. More specifically, this study could produce a new theory of how rural and suburban school superintendents can remain focused on student growth.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into four chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature pertaining to superintendent leadership. Chapter 3 presents the research method, research context, description of research participants, data collection instruments, and a description of the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 includes in-depth analysis of the data, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings and makes recommendations to the field of study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Research indicates leaders positively affect student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013). This literature review focuses on superintendent leadership and identifies school-wide systems that promote student growth. Kouzes and Posner (2012) identifies 20 characteristics of exceptional leaders. The application of these characteristics to superintendent leaders includes building trust and rapport with staff, focusing on growth of students, celebrating successes, and emphasizing best instructional practices (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Researchers agree leadership matters when it comes to making changes that lead to student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013).

Superintendent leaders create conditions that promote student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013). Involving stakeholders results in greater acceptance during the change process (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). For example, a superintendent who routinely involves teachers in the decision-making process leads to greater student growth (Toprak & Summak, 2014). Another component is creating conditions for open dialogue about teacher and student data that lead to greater student growth (Horn et al., 2015). Last, data-rich multi-tiered systems lead to greater growth for all students (Dulaney, Hallam, & Wall, 2013; Reis & Boeve, 2009). Superintendents who create these conditions that focus on student learning support all students in reaching their full potential (Drago-Severson et al., 2015).

Review of the Literature

This chapter's in-depth exploration reviews the research literature revealing the ways superintendent leaders influence student growth. It also identifies best practices that positively affect student growth.

Superintendent leadership. This section of the literature review examines the relationship between superintendent leaders and their influences on student growth. One way to identify characteristics of effective superintendents is to examine meta-analytic research (Leithwood et al., 2004). The findings from the meta-analysis by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (2006) are based on 27 studies. Waters and Marzano (2006) analyzed existing studies that involve district leadership or variables relating to superintendent leadership in the United States from 1970 until 2005. The two variables for inclusion in their research included (a) a correlation between district leadership and the academic success of students, which allows for the calculating of a correlation; and (b) the use of a standardized measure of student outcomes, or key indexes, based on a standardized assessment. In total, the study involved 2,817 districts and the scores of 3.4 million students, providing a very large quantitative examination of research on the relationship of school superintendents and student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

In addition to the meta-analysis of secondary data, researchers Waters and Marzano (2006) examined five questions during the study: (a) what is the strength of correlation between leadership of school superintendents and student academic success, (b) what superintendent leadership responsibilities are related to student academic success, (c) what explicit leadership practices are used to fulfill responsibilities of school

superintendents, (d) does a strong leader always have a positive effect on student success, and (e) is there a relationship between superintendent tenure and student success?

There are five major findings from the analytic study. Waters and Marzano (2006) studied the strength of correlation between leadership of school superintendents and student academic success. Of the 27 accounts studied in the meta-analysis, 14 (excluding statistical outliers) had evidence about the correlation between superintendent leadership and student educational success. The 14 reports contain information from 1,210 school districts. The correlation between district leadership and student achievement is relatively weak $r = .24, p < .05$ (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The second, third, and fourth research questions by Waters and Marzano (2006) probed (a) what superintendent leadership responsibilities are related to student academic success, (b) what explicit leadership practices are used to fulfill responsibilities of school superintendents, and (c) does strong leadership always have a positive effect on student success? In response to these three questions, Waters and Marzano (2006) found five district-level leadership responsibilities with a statistically significant ($p < .05$) correlation with student academic success, which Table 2.1 highlights.

Last, Waters and Marzano (2006) explored the relationship between superintendent tenure and student success. These two studies had a weak correlation, $r = .19, p < .05$ (Waters & Marzano, 2006). That means that 4% of the variation in student academic growth was explained by the variation in superintendent longevity.

Waters and Marzano (2006) concluded that superintendent leadership does affect student growth and achievement. More specifically, there are several specific superintendent practices that have significant positive correlations to student growth and

achievement. Similarly Hallanger’s (2010) study of leaders reviewed the values and beliefs of school superintendents.

Table 2.1

Results of Waters and Marzano’s Research on Superintendent Responsibilities

Superintendent Responsibilities	Average r
Use of Resources in Supporting the Goals of Achievement and Instruction	.26
Superintendent Relationship with Schools	.28
Goal Setting Process	.24
Non-Negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction	.33
Board Alignment with Support of District Goals	.29
Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction	.27

Note. Average r = correlation coefficient. Adapted from “School District Leadership That Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement. A Working Paper,” by J. Waters and R. Marzano, 2006, *Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)*, p. 10. Copyright 2006 by McREL

Hallinger (2010) conducted a systematic review of recent empirical studies to analyze each approach to leadership. The review identifies six aspects of superintendent leadership: (a) values and beliefs, (b) goals and vision, (c) leadership focus, (d) capacity building, (e) contexts for leadership, and (f) sharing leadership.

Hallinger’s (2010) review of research on values and beliefs of school superintendents concluded that having high expectations for teachers and student has benefits to student growth. When identifying values and goals Hallinger (2010) concludes that all children can learn and grow. Superintendents’ beliefs and actions have an impact their values. Superintendent values, in turn, impact student achievement. The research concluded that both visioning and goal setting must maintain a growth focus.

The leadership focus of the study suggests that leadership, alone, is not a viable solution (Hallinger, 2010; Kouzes & Posner 2012). Hallinger noted that student achievement relates to collaborative leadership, school improvement capability, and leadership. Leaders' ability to increase the capacity of building leaders and teachers is extremely important. Research in leadership indicates all levels of leadership must be functioning at a high level in order to move change forward (Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2010). Findings suggest that leaders who are able to adapt to several leadership styles, depending on the situation, are more likely to lead change initiatives to success (Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2010; Kouzes & Posner 2012).

Hallinger's (2010) findings have implications for superintendent leaders. Greater leadership capacity leads to greater academic success (Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2010). Furthermore, Hallinger (2010) stipulated that superintendent leaders are more successful implementing change when their leadership style can adapt to specific situations. Other studies have attempted to capture school superintendent characteristics which leads to successful change.

Superintendent characteristics. The Chingos et al. (2014) research objective was to determine observable characteristics that extraordinary superintendents possess. Additionally, Chingos et al. (2014) identified factors that designate exceptional superintendents.

The subjects in the study were students in the states of North Carolina and Florida from 2001-2010. Individual student scores, which were standardized by state, grade, subject, and school year led to approximately 23 million data points over the 10-year span. Superintendent data includes years of service and school district name. Chingos et

al. (2014) conclude there are very few observable characteristics of school superintendents that relate to student achievement. Furthermore, Chingos et al. (2014) determined that exceptional superintendents have a greater impact on student achievement. However, it is difficult to measure why these superintendents have a greater impact on student achievement.

Superintendents and the trust factor. Superintendents are often change agents in their school districts. Research estimates only 30% of change initiatives in school districts lead to successful transformations (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Devos, Buelens, and Bouckennooghe (2007) study had two hypotheses: (a) higher levels of trust in executive management and a highly successful change history are linked to employees' higher levels of openness to change, and (b) trust in executives and history of change relates in that the effects of trust in executive management are stronger when the history of change is successful. The effects of openness to change is stronger when trust in executive management is high.

Devos et al. (2007) survey was given to individuals who had experienced a change initiative at their workplace. There were a total of 828 respondents from the private and public sector. Approximately 78% of respondents described themselves as a professional or in a managerial position. Devos et al. employed a randomized 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design with two levels (high and low) for each independent variable. Results of the first hypothesis indicate factors that lead to making change successful. In summary, superintendents should promote trust between themselves and all employees by including all stakeholders when making change decisions (Devos et al., 2007).

Findings in the second hypothesis indicate that a high level of trust in executive management and a successful history of change are essential. Furthermore, the study revealed a significant interplay between the two variables. Devos et al. (2007) suggested that when history and trust are low, the likelihood of a successful change becomes less plausible. Whether or not leaders are advancing organizational effectiveness or adaptation to external environments, organizations change (Cripe, 2009). Despite its difficulties, change is inevitable. Cripe (2009) indicated two additional considerations for superintendents who are managing a change process: (a) how to execute changes, and (b) how to improve employees' motivation toward change.

When successfully managing the change process exceptional leadership can result in greater student growth. Chingos et al. (2014) determined exceptional superintendents have greater impact on student growth. Empirical analysis by Kouzes and Posner (2012) identified 20 characteristics of exceptional leaders. Reviewing the characteristics of exceptional leaders has implications for school superintendents who aspire to be exceptional leaders in their schools. The design of the study included 100,000 people partaking in the Characteristics of Admired Leaders checklist. Through this checklist, Kouzes and Posner asked respondents to choose seven qualities. Over several years of collecting data, the important characteristics were identified. Table 2.2 illustrates the results of the data.

Kouzes and Posner's (2012) analysis of the data reveals key findings. As a result of the study, Kouzes and Posner developed a model of five leadership practices that help extraordinary leaders grow their respective organizations. The five practices of exemplary leadership are: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the

Table 2.2

*Characteristics of Admired Leaders: Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each**Characteristic*

Characteristic	1987	1995	2002	2007	2012
Honest	83	88	88	89	89
Forward Thinking	62	75	71	71	71
Competent	67	63	66	68	69
Inspiring	58	68	65	69	69
Intelligent	43	40	47	48	45
Broad-minded	37	40	40	35	38
Fair-Minded	40	49	42	39	37
Dependable	33	32	33	34	35
Supportive	32	41	35	35	35
Straightforward	34	33	34	36	32
Cooperative	25	28	28	25	27
Determined	17	17	23	25	26
Courageous	27	29	20	25	22
Ambitious	21	13	17	16	21

Note. These percentages represent six continents: Africa, North America, South America, Asia, Europe, and Australia. The majority of respondents were from the United States. Respondents were asked select seven characteristics, thus the total adds up to more than 100%. Adapted from “The Leadership Challenge,” by J. Kouzes and B. Posner, 2012, p. 34. Copyright 2008 by Wiley Brand.

process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. Kouzes and Posner (2012)

concluded that leaders who are honest, forward-thinking, competent, and inspiring will

help their organizations grow.

Qualities of inspiring superintendents are challenging to identify (Chingos et al., 2014). Attempting to identify superintendent qualities that are critical to the change process, Toprak and Summak (2014) examined how teacher involvement in change influences their commitment to change. The design of the study examined the national educational reform in Turkey (Toprak & Summak, 2014). Turkish educators have historically been involved in a radical and top-down approach to change. The causal-comparative design included a stratified sample of 573 educators who completed the Involvement in Change Scale (Toprak & Summak, 2014) and the Commitment to Change Scale (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). The findings indicate that teachers who were involved in the change had a larger commitment to the educational change than those who were not part of the change process. Moreover, the results indicate teacher negativity toward change is a direct result of the lack of teacher involvement in the change process. Additionally, the research suggests that involvement in the change process negatively influences teachers' continuing commitment to educational changes.

Toprak and Summak (2014) referred to Kurt Lewin's (1946) force field analysis (FFA) theory. Lewin's theory points out there are restraining and driving forces in organizations where both forces are equal and create quasi-stationary equilibrium. In order for change to occur during the unfreezing process, either restraining forces are weakened, or driving forces are strengthened. By helping employees understand what change entails, the rationale behind the change, and fostering their mental models, teachers and school administrators become more supportive of the change process (Toprak & Summak, 2014).

There are several implications from Toprak and Summak, (2014) about superintendent leadership. Table 2.3 illustrates the results of the data. The study suggests superintendents should involve stakeholders in the change process to increase the probability of becoming successful. Superintendents providing mental models of change increase the probability of the change becoming successful. Finally, school superintendents might need to unfreeze restraining forces so driving forces can be strengthened.

Table 2.3

Involvement in Change and Commitment to Change Scales

Dimensions	Items	Alpha	\bar{X}	S	n
Involvement in Decision	3	.945	1.793	.944	573
Communication	6	.943	2.025	.927	573
Involvement in Change (Total)	9	.959	1.948	.894	573
Affective Commitment	6	.936	2.404	1.107	573
Normative Commitment	5	.793	2.824	.5925	573
Continuance Commitment	5	.838	3.014	.8841	573
Commitment to Change (Total)	16	.883	2.667	.645	573

Note. Table 2.3 shows that teachers’ mean average for involvement in change is 1.948 and of their commitment to change is 2.667. Teachers were asked to rate items on a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 – never agree, 5 – completely agree. Items = number of questions. N = number of participants. Adapted from “Involvement to Change and Commitment to Change Study,” by M. Toprak and M. Summak, 2014, 4, p. 960. Copyright 2014 by International Journal of Social Sciences and Education.

Supporting student growth. Whitney, Maras, and Schisler (2012) examined potential differences amongst district- and school-level influences. Using a mixed-methods design, 23 district-level and school-level staff were interviewed. Whitney et al.

(2012) randomly sampled 125 school administrators in Missouri to determine the effects superintendents and building level leaders had on student achievement. Nine public- and school-based variables were measured and produced a risk score based on poverty levels. The other data collection method involved semi-structured interviews of administrators at the building and district level. The semi-structured interview questions gained viewpoints on why these schools exhibited growth and academic achievement despite difficult environmental factors. Coded data from these interviews revealed a list of common themes including academic and emotional support for students.

The findings by Whitney et al. (2012) generated themes ranging from administrative support, health and mental health support services, as well as high student expectations and accountability. The average interview exposed 8.5 themes. The themes were in rank order by frequency during the interviews. Results of the study identify administrative support as the most frequent theme. Administrative support refers to principals' and superintendents' high expectations for academic achievement. In addition to high expectations, allowing teachers the freedom to employ best practices emerged as a theme. Other specific definitions of effective administrative support included focusing on problem solving, visiting classrooms, being visible during the school day, having admiration from students and teachers, and being compassionate about protecting instructional time (Whitney et al., 2012).

The Whitney et al. (2012) study also examined qualitative data at the district and school levels. The district-level administrators stressed high-quality school personnel, collaboration of all staff, and the stability of the labor force. District-level administrators described dedicated school staff as student focused and involved. District-level

administrators acknowledged how important it is to have teachers who consistently demand high quality work from students, believe all students can achieve and grow academically, and volunteer for after-school programs. Upper-level administration pointed toward high-quality teachers that continuously reflect on how to improve their teaching practices.

Last, overall results indicated three emergent themes: administrative support, professional collaboration, and academic support programs. The study also examined variations between district-level and school-level concerns. The interviews indicated district-level administrators focused on retention of high-quality teachers and staff. One other district level administrator theme emerged, which was how to deliver opportunities about collaboration. The schools' results focused on the existing needs of the students and the support to meet those needs (Whitney et al., 2012).

Whitney et al. (2012) suggested superintendents remain focused on the needs of all stakeholders. Specifically, superintendents should be focused on high-quality teachers and staff, in addition to providing the opportunities for teachers to collaborate. The mental health of students emerged as a concern; moreover, the importance of establishing preventative programs for student behavior arose from the research (Whitney et al., 2012).

Possible systems that lead to student growth. The Drago-Severson et al. (2015) qualitative study examined the current leadership landscape. Using the Heifetz model (1994), Drago-Severson et al. (2015) categorized technical and adaptive challenges. The leader's role in technical challenges involved defining the problem and providing solutions. The leader's role in the adaptive challenges was to identify challenges and ask

key questions. The research in the study focused on what school leaders named as the most pressing issues and how they described, understood, and managed solutions.

Drago-Severson et al. (2015) employed a qualitative design where the sample included 24 educational leaders including six district leaders, 13 principals, and five assistant principals from four geographic regions. Semi-structured interviews with four key open-ended questions were used for the qualitative data collection. The data analysis included a theoretical and emic coding. The common themes of the interviews included a focus on leading change, identifying something for which the leaders cared deeply, and dealing with complex issues. One participant shared his technical challenges by stating, “One of the biggest challenges is the budget. If my staff wants technology, I’m going to do my best to get that technology” (Drago-Severson et al., 2015, p. 2). Another participant spoke about the adaptive challenges by stating, “It’s figuring out how to do something that rarely or is never done” (p. 4). Participants in the study felt the need to lead change. Furthermore, participants who are technical and adaptive leaders are better prepared to lead their districts and buildings. Last, Drago-Severson et al. (2015) uncovered leaders in the study who chose to adopt a learning stance and take a learning action.

Achievement and growth. Hattie (2009) sought to identify educational practices that have significant impact on student achievement. Meta-analyses included 800 studies culled from 50,000 individual studies. Hattie’s (2009) sample represented 80 million students worldwide. For the purposes of Hattie’s (2009) study, it recognized that one standard deviation equals two to four grade equivalents and 200 points on a Standardized Achievement Test (SAT). A typical student gains .40 in a single school year. Relevant

statistics that corresponded to average changes in learning appear in Table 2.4. It is organized by the average effect for each major contributor to learning.

The findings of Hattie’s (2009) research are extensive. Foremost, explicit instruction in reading comprehension scored a .60 on the SAT. Phonics-based instruction

Table 2.4

Average Effect for Each of the Major Contributors of Learning

Contribution	No.	Studies	People	Effects	d	SE	CLE
Student	139	11,101	7,513,406	38,282	.40	.044	29%
Home	36	2,211	11,672,658	5,182	.31	.058	22%
School	101	4,150	4,416,898	13,348	.23	.072	16%
Teacher	31	2,225	402,325	5,559	.49	.049	35%
Curricula	144	7,102	6,899,428	29,220	.45	.076	32%
Teaching	365	25,860	52,128,719	55,143	.42	.071	30%
Average	816	52,649	83,033,433	146,626	.40	.062	28%

Note. No. = total amount of people who answered the survey. d = correlation between subject and effects on learning. .40 = typical student gains in 1 year. Adapted from “Visual Learning” by J. Hattie, 2009, p. 42. Copyright 2009 by Routledge.

also scored a .60 on the SAT. Hattie (2009) concluded the most powerful tool for students to gain knowledge is the use of common formative assessment, which scored a .90 on the SAT. The decision to implement common formative assessments often stems from the desire to identify a common set of learning targets across a grade level and then to measure students’ attainment of those targets (Bailey, Jakicic, & Spiller, 2013). The assessment data can be aggregated at the grade level and analyzed by standard, teacher, subgroup, and student. Teachers use that data to inform instruction in time to make a

change in the learning experience. Likewise, students are provided with feedback in order to close learning gaps.

Hattie (2009) concludes superintendents who set up a school system that encourages the use of common formative assessment will have a large impact on student growth. Additionally, school systems set up to teach explicit reading instruction leads to greater student growth and achievement.

Growth systems. According to Dulaney et al. (2013), interest in multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is gaining momentum nationally. MTSS is a system that relies on the collaborative process to ensure continuous school improvement. The qualitative study examined superintendent views regarding opportunities and difficulties in MTSS implementation.

In 2011, 66% of Kansas superintendents completed a survey centered on three themes: collaborative process, data-based decision making, and the identification of evidence-based practices. Nine superintendents were then interviewed based on their existing district practices with MTSS.

Dulaney et al. (2013) findings concluded that superintendents who have a strategic plan have a greater success during the change process. “All school districts have great visions. What most don’t have is a systematic strategy for getting there” (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, p. 242). Dulaney et al. (2013) found that superintendents who do not have a systematic strategy for obtaining their goals are less effective. The MTSS framework could assist superintendents and school leaders to reach their goals. Other findings from the study included: sustainable change by superintendents should develop a common language and framework, include a professional learning community (PLC)

model to create rich opportunities for dialogue, and provide opportunities for professional development to build capacity.

Another example of an MTSS framework for students is response to intervention (RTI). RTI is a multi-tiered approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. The RTI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom.

The Printy and Williams (2015) study about RTI emphasized the implementation of RTI at the middle school level and focused on two essential questions: (a) where do middle school principals get their information about RTI, and which parts of RTI do principals seem to practice; and (b) what are some of the conditions that influence RTI decision making? The qualitative design of this study focused on six principals and their implementation of RTI in their schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals.

The results of the interviews showed it takes a strong leader and teacher involvement to make RTI successful. Furthermore, the superintendents involved in the study provided a consistent message that RTI was the direction for school improvement. They identified the use of data as a contributing factor of success. The six middle school principals involved in the study felt they had very strong support from their superintendent. In the study, it was noted that the superintendents held the vision of RTI.

City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009) developed a system-wide approach to improving student learning. City et al. (2009) research centered in Cambridge, Massachusetts to support systems that support instructional improvement on a school-district scale. City et al. (2009) connected classroom observation practice to the school

system improvement strategy of Instructional Rounds. Rounds is a four-step process: (a) identifying a problem of practice, (b) observing teaching, (c) debriefing about the data collected during observations, and (d) focusing on the next level of work. Utilizing collective school district knowledge to uncover problems of practice allows school districts to increase the knowledge of a shared vision and mission. Printy and Williams (2015) study about RTI, emphasized that school superintendents must hold the vision as well as communicate the vision effectively. Effective communication of the school district vision leads to continuous student growth (City et al., 2009; Printy & Williams, 2015). City et al. (2009) research about rounds has been done primarily at the district level, resulting in improved practice at the district and school levels.

City et al. (2009) research concluded that the impact of rounds as a tool to make instructional improvements is very successful. Superintendent leaders from four different school districts described rounds as the best professional development they had ever had. Through superintendent interviews, City et al. (2009) concluded rounds is a “powerful accelerant of school and district improvement” (p. 171). To bring good instruction on a district-wide scale, school districts should accomplish three common tasks: (a) develop a common definition on what high-quality teaching and learning looks like, (b) build a collaborative learning culture, and (c) focus on a few key improvement strategies and align human and financial resources to support learning (City et al., 2009).

Another district-wide improvement process is blended learning (Van Der Ark, 2014). Blended learning requires a shift to an online environment for part of the day, thus giving students control. Implementation of blended learning requires an integrated

approach around teaching and learning, information technology, human capital, and communication.

Van Der Ark's (2014) research on blended learning took place in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. At the time of the study, the Rocky Mount Preparatory School was a K-12 charter school with approximately 1,100 students. After studying many options with stakeholder input, the superintendent selected a blended learning approach to teaching mathematics throughout the school district. The four-step implementation process included: (a) design of a new learning lab to accommodate 100 students at a time, (b) creation of a formative assessment to diagnose strengths and weaknesses of student math skills, (c) selecting intervention tools, and (d) a 90-minute learning lab designed to assist struggling learners.

Data analysis of math scores from fall to winter showed dramatic increases in mathematic skills. At the beginning of the 2012-13 school year, the majority of students were working below grade-level skills (Van Der Ark, 2014). Van Der Ark (2014) concluded that by mid-year, all student mathematic skills were at or above grade level. The superintendent process for implementing blended learning has common successful student growth results. Blended learning and instructional rounds are implemented with stakeholder input, as well as by using formative assessment to drive instruction (City et al., 2009; Van Der Ark, 2014). Another school superintendent approach involving stakeholders and using formative assessment is project-based learning (PBL).

Barron and Darling-Hammond (2008), defined PBL as containing four elements: (a) increase in knowledge of tackling real-world problems, (b) increase in student control of their learning, (c) teachers serve as coaches and facilitators, and (d) students work in

pairs or groups. Halvorsen et al. (2015) designed a study using PBL methodologies with the Michigan social studies curriculum. PBL curriculum was given to students from a low socio-economic status (SES) school district and a high SES school district in Michigan. The sample includes six second-grade teachers, two from the high SES school district, and four from the low SES school district.

The measure for student achievement included one-on-one interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was administered by a trained researcher who recorded the interviews. The outcomes rendered statistically insignificant results comparing the low SES to the high SES students using the PBL curriculum (Halvorsen et al., 2015). Hattie (2009) and Halvorsen et al., (2015) studies concluded that giving students feedback is the critical element in any approach to increasing student growth. School superintendents who put a system in place which allows teachers to provide feedback is critical for student growth.

Chapter Summary

Superintendent leaders create conditions that promote student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013). However, it is difficult to measure why these superintendents have positive impact on student learning (Chingos et al., 2014). In addition, there is a lack of research regarding how superintendents create conditions to promote student growth (Leithwood et al., 2004; Heck & Hallinger, 1998). This literature review focused on superintendent leadership and identified school-wide systems that impact student growth. This literature review identified that data-rich multi-tiered systems, such as G&T and RTI, lead to greater growth for all students (Dulaney et al., 2013; Reis & Boeve, 2009). Superintendent leadership and creating school-wide

systems for growth are significant factors that help all students reach their full potential. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology for this grounded theory study. Chapter 3 also includes an overview of the research context, research participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

This chapter summarizes the research methodology for this grounded theory study on school superintendents' commitment to student growth for the purposes of continuous school improvement. The alignment between the problem statement, research questions, and design is described. An overview of the research context, research participants, data collection, and data analysis method is also included.

Introduction

This grounded theory research focuses on the following questions:

1. What leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions do superintendents demonstrate that lead to student growth?
2. What are the school district conditions that superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth?

This research provides findings to these questions in an effort to inform leaders in their professional practice, and it may develop a leadership model that promotes student growth.

A grounded research theory approach is employed to answer research questions. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory consists of flexible methodical guidelines that enable researchers to focus on their data to produce theory. Furthermore, grounded theory methodology delivers a set of procedures in order to develop theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Additionally, the procedures in grounded theory help researchers study new and emerging areas that are in need of investigation.

Grounded theory helps uncover the beliefs and meanings that underlie action, examine behavior, and demonstrate how logic and emotion combine to influence a person's response to events or how a person handles problems through his or her actions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This type of qualitative research examines human choice and behavior in the natural setting, and it has proven to be culturally sensitive and applicable to individuals (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The logic of grounded theory research involves coding empirical data and working with the resultant codes to construct a conceptual theory (Charmaz, 2011). Finally, the knowledge gained through grounded theory methodology enables one to suggest actions to alter, contain, or change situations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This grounded theory study was used to develop a theory about school superintendents who remain committed to student growth, and it will help school superintendents improve their practice.

The purpose of this grounded theory research method was to allow for an understanding of multiple layers of behavior in how superintendent leaders think, interact, and make decisions. Explicitly, this research identifies behaviors, actions, beliefs, and experiences of school superintendents who demonstrate a commitment to student growth. The use of grounded theory methodology sought to develop a conceptual theory that examined school superintendents' commitment to student growth.

Research Context

A convenience sample of school superintendents was used from the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services (OCM BOCES) and Oneida-Herkimer-Madison (OHM BOCES) regions in Central New York. Within the OCM and OHM BOCES regions, a purposeful sample was taken. Purposeful sampling is

a nonrandom technique where one selects participants with certain characteristics (Saldaña, 2013). A canvass email was sent to the OCM and OHM BOCES regions. It included a brief explanation of the study and two attachments, an official Letter of Introduction (Appendix A) and the IRB-approved consent form (Appendix B) for participation in the study. The interviews were with superintendent leaders in the OCM BOCES, as well as the OHM BOCES. The OCM BOCES is made up of 23 component school districts, as well as the City of Syracuse. The largest component school district in the OCM BOCES is Cicero-North Syracuse (CNS), which has an enrollment of 8,920 students (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2014). The smallest district in the OCM BOCES region is the Lyncourt School District with an enrollment of 309 students. The OHM BOCES consists of 12 component school districts. The largest component school district in the OHM BOCES is the Utica City School District with an enrollment of 9,260 students (NYSED, 2014). The Utica City School District, Syracuse, and Cazenovia Central Schools were excluded from the sample. The researcher is employed in the Cazenovia Central School District, therefore to eliminate bias, this school district was excluded from the research.

Research Participants

For this research, 32 superintendents were invited to be a part of the study via email. The superintendent sample was suburban and rural school districts across the OCM and OHM BOCES regions. Of the 32 superintendents in the regions, 15 superintendents agreed to participate in the study. The 15 one-on-one interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. The interview format and questions can be found in Appendix C. The interviews took place in the office of each school

superintendent. Each participant was a practicing school superintendent at the time of the interview. In order to reach saturation for this qualitative research study, 15 interviews were conducted. There is no set number of interviews for a grounded theory study, but typically, this type of research includes interviews with 5 to 25 participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). Each interview was conducted in the office of the participant. The participants were all from suburban and rural school districts. The informed consent forms were collected from each interviewee and remain on file. The interviews were recorded and transcribed during the coding process, resulting in the data reaching a point of saturation.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The purpose of this grounded theory research was to allow for an understanding of the multiple layers of behavior involved in how superintendent leaders think, interact, and make decisions. Grounded theory uses a constant comparative method of data collection and analysis, which allows the process of comparing different pieces of data against each other for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Questioning allows one to probe, develop provisional answers, think outside the box, become acquainted with the data, and it is useful at every stage of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). During the interviews, open-ended questions were used, which lead to understanding the participants' behaviors, actions, beliefs, and experiences (Johnson & Christenson, 2015). These questions were pre-tested, with a request for feedback, from non-participating school superintendents in the Central New York region.

Each interview session with a participant began with the researcher reading the prepared statement below, which explained the purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to identify superintendent leaders' characteristics, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate a commitment to student growth. This study focuses on the common characteristics of superintendent leaders who create conditions that promote student growth. I will be recording this interview. If you are uncomfortable with recording this interview, please let me know and the interview will not be recorded. This is a volunteer process and you do not have to answer any question you do not want to. All volunteers are anonymous and your name will never appear in any documentation linking you to this study. I am going to ask you questions now; again, if you do not want to answer any question, just let me know. Also, if at any time you would like to stop the interview, simply let me know.

The questions were open-ended in nature and the interviews were between 30 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes. Corbin and Strauss (2015) encouraged the use of open-ended questions in a grounded theory study. The interview questions fell into four categories: (a) introduction questions, (b) opening questions, (c) main questions and probes, and (d) closing questions. All questions were carefully crafted. One must develop an interview protocol for interviewing and recording answers (Creswell, 2013). All questions developed for this research can be found in Appendix C.

The interviews were recorded; however, during one superintendent interview, the recording device malfunctioned. As a result, there were 14 interviews transcribed, which became the initial data set.

In summary, the participant interviews were recorded and transcribed via a professional transcription service. Observations were also part of the data set, and they

were recorded by memo after each 1-hour session. Furthermore, any documents shared by the superintendents were reviewed as part of the data collection process. Field notes were also taken and became part of the data set. Given that grounded theory includes open-ended questions (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2014), and the initial question were open ended, the participants were asked to explain specific experiences and describe them to the interviewer/researcher (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Grounded theory is a constant comparative method of data collection and analysis, which allows comparing different pieces of data against each other for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this case, the research questions helped formulate the interview protocol, thus providing the majority of the data for this grounded theory study.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis in grounded theory leads to the qualitative researcher generating a theory by emerging him- or herself in the data (Saldaña, 2013). To generate a new theory, Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended 20 to 30 visits to the field to reach saturation. This research included 15 one-on-one superintendent interviews. This constant comparative method took data from the interviews, and categories began to emerge. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended varying levels of coding for grounded theory research. This study used initial coding, category development, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). This grounded theory research contained four steps; however, it should be pointed out there was an interrelationship between the data collection and the analysis.

According to Saldaña (2013), initial coding is the first major open-ended stage of a grounded theory approach to collecting data. Open coding broke down the qualitative data into discrete parts and compared the similarities and differences in the data. This approach was appropriate for this study, but especially for novice qualitative researchers for grounded theory studies. As part of the initial coding process, analytic memos were written.

Memo writings were the researcher's written reflections on the themes and complex meaning of the raw data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). Each memo was assigned a number, dated, and assigned with a title of a concept. Each memo was written after each superintendent interview. Typically, the memos became longer and more accurate as the study progressed (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

The use of diagrams resulted in visual devices that depicted relationships between analytic concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Diagrams helped conceptualize the researcher's thinking beyond the level of description. Diagrams help explain the research to a variety of stakeholders in an organized, visual way. Drawing meaning from diagrams helps the researcher make meaning from large qualitative data sets (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Early research diagrams were not elaborate; however, they grew in complexity as more interviews occurred.

During the initial coding process, *meaning units* were recorded. Initially, the meaning unit concept label was as abstract as possible so all concepts could be applied to all of the participants. A meaning unit helps a qualitative researcher examine the interview transcript for important statements. After the meaning units were recorded, the researcher began the initial labeling process. Over 150 pages of single-spaced transcripts

led to the development of meaning units. There were 439 meaning unit labels as a result of examining each transcript. The meaning units were direct quotes from each superintendent's transcript. Review of the field notes and memos assisted in the creation of each meaning unit label. This initial coding process helped the researcher break down the qualitative data into discrete parts (Saldaña, 2013). The creation of meaning units mirrored the process called in vivo coding. In vivo coding uses short phrases from the participants own language (Saldaña, 2013).

The second step, *category development* included reviewing the meaning units and categorizing the meaning units into labels. During category development, the researcher reexamined the 439 meaning unit labels. The visual tool Wordle, which generates *word clouds*, and it was used to break down the 439 meaning unit labels into categories.

Wordle clouds gave greater prominence to words that appeared most frequently. This step also included reexamining the participants' transcripts. Initially, this step resulted in the creation of 11 themes. As a last part of the category development, the researcher connected the 11 themes with relevant quotes from the participants' transcripts. The creation of the 11 themes mirrored the process called in focused coding. Focused coding searches the most frequent or significant initial codes to develop the most significant categories (Saldaña, 2013).

The third step, called *axial coding*, moved the data from initial coding and category development into the development of six categories. The process of axial coding helped describe the six categories' characteristics and dimensions, and it helped to explore how the categories and subcategories related to each other (Saldaña, 2013). During this step, the six categories were tied directly to the research questions. As a way

to verify the development of the six categories member checking was utilized. Member checking consisted of the researcher consulting with colleagues to help validate the findings (Saldaña, 2013).

The final step, called *theoretical coding*, helped the researcher discover the central core category and identify a major theme. It is important to point out that theoretical coding is not a theory in itself, but it models the incorporation of all codes and emerging categories (Saldaña, 2013). Theoretical coding specifies possible relationships between categories and moves the analytic story in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical coding was appropriate as a culminating step toward achieving grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). This step led to creating a visual representation of the grounded theory.

Chapter Summary

This grounded theory research methodology helped to uncover the superintendent leaders' behaviors, actions, beliefs, and experiences. It informed the educational practice so other superintendent leaders can remain focused on student growth. In order to identify student growth systems that the superintendents put into place, there were several steps in this research methodology.

The data collection process included one-on-one interviews with 15 school superintendents from the OCM and OHM BOCES regions in Central New York. The one hour interviews included the use of open-ended questions, and responses were recorded and transcribed.

In this grounded theory study, data collection and data analysis were interconnected. This study utilized four steps in the data collection and analysis: initial

coding, category development, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). The final step created a theory. The theories began with concepts that evolved and linkages between concepts emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This led to developing a core category, which captured the theme or essence of the study and enabled other categories and concepts to be integrated. From these categories and concepts derived from the data, a theoretical explanation developed. This theoretical explanation was the overarching logic that explained how superintendent leaders influence student growth. The findings from this research identified the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of school superintendents who demonstrate a commitment to student growth. Additionally, this research focused on the school district conditions that superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth. The data to answer these findings is presented in Chapter 4. Conclusions from this study are in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this grounded theory research was to understand the multiple layers of behavior concerning how superintendent leaders think, interact, and make decisions. Explicitly, this research identifies the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of school superintendents who demonstrate a commitment to student growth. Furthermore, this research focused on the school district conditions that superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth. Understanding this research has the potential to inform current and future school superintendent leaders to improve their professional practice. Qualitative data were collected through 15 one-on-one interviews with existing school superintendents. The data was analyzed using a constant comparative method. An emerging theory of *leadership for student growth* is described through three core categories and six key themes. Dimensions and properties of each category are embedded in each section.

Corbin and Strauss (2015) defined the development of a core category as a concept that is sufficiently broad and abstract that uses a few words to express the main idea in the study. They further explained that the development of a core category represents what the researcher determines as the main theme of the research. Last, Corbin and Strauss (2015) believed that if the core category is sufficiently abstract, it can be used in future similar studies to build conceptual frameworks.

Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to report the findings of the research. Through the use of grounded theory methodology, the research sought to develop a conceptual theory that examines school superintendents' commitment to student growth. The emerging theory of *leadership for student growth* answers the following two research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics, behaviors and actions do superintendents demonstrate that lead to student growth?
2. What are the school district conditions superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth?

This chapter is organized into three categories and nine themes that emerged from the research questions. The first category, *trust*, incorporates the theme of *critical conversations* and *distributive leadership*. The second category, *balanced data system*, incorporates the theme of *multiple data points*. The third and final category, *systems thinking*, incorporates the themes of *strategic planning*, *explicit professional development*, and *stimulating a learning culture*. Table 4.1 illustrates a summary of the categories and themes of *leadership for student growth*, as well as it captures the dimensions and properties of the themes.

Category 1: trust. The first category, trust, emerged as a multifaceted category when the participants described it as a confidence from the school community that a school superintendent earns over a period of time. The two themes identified in the category include (a) critical conversations, and (b) distributive leadership. Dimensions and properties were also added to create a deep understanding of the participants' experiences.

Table 4.1

Summary of Categories and Themes of Leadership for Student Growth

Category	Themes	Dimensions and Properties
Trust	Critical Conversation	Planting the Seed
	Distributive Leadership	Promoting Innovative Implementation
Balanced Data System	Multiple Data Points	Multidimensional Understanding
Systems Thinking	Strategic Planning	Embedded Process
	Explicit Professional Development	Cultivating Intended Skills
	Stimulating a Learning Culture	Leading Change

The participants’ descriptions highlighted critical conversations and distributive leadership as key factors for creating trust. Critical conversations and distributive leadership included planting a seed, as well as the concept of promoting innovative implementation.

Critical conversations. Many of the superintendent participants described building trust as a process that happens over a period of time. To build trust, the superintendents referred to critical conversations as being an important step in building stakeholders’ trust. For example, according to Superintendent 9, “So, really, it takes stepping back and having conversations about what do we value” (p. 2). Superintendent 9 elaborated by stating, “They’re not always comfortable conversations” (p. 2). Another critical conversation was captured by Superintendent 4, when reflecting on a recent conversation with a high school department chair:

And she said, “I thought you were going to do that. I am resigning my position as department chair.” I said, “So be it; thank you,” . . . and I said, “By Friday, he’s

in your class; figure it out and don't pick on him. If you pick on him, then you're going to have trouble with that too." (p. 2)

Superintendent 4 believed in shifting culture by allowing students into accelerated classes, thus difficult conversations were critical in shifting individual teachers thinking. Reflecting further on this conversation, Superintendent 4 believed that in order to shift the culture, difficult conversations were critical. Superintendent 12 stated, "So, you have to build trust, and that's critical" (to be effective as a school superintendent) (Superintendent 12, p. 1). Superintendent 13 also stated, "So, I think you know good, bad, or ugly. You have a leader that's in for a while . . . or the person that you like and trust. Hopefully it's the person that you like and trust" (p. 2). Superintendent 13 further elaborated:

So, the change piece, I don't think you can do anything at all without building trust ahead of time. So, to me, it's change management, but it starts with trust building in the beginning and then making your changes, and having a mental gas pedal of how much change is too much change in one. (p. 5)

Further reflecting on the practice of critical conversations participants referred to planting a seed. Throughout the interviews, the majority of superintendents believed that trust grows over time. For example, "you plant seeds for, like, smaller ones from like 6 months to a year, and then when you really start to thinking about it, then you've got to form an opinion, and by then you've collected all your facts" (Superintendent 13, p. 4). Superintendent 13 described an example:

Let's just use redistricting. So when that was going to happen, every now and then I would say, "Man it would be great if I could have the same amount of time

for art in this building.” I do in this one, but I can’t because, you know, the building enrollments aren’t the same, so I’ve got to use more resources over here and over here. (p. 4)

When referring to building trust in the school district community, Superintendent 13 stated, “The trust piece is huge, but I also think, too, over time, I think you can still have the trust of the community” (p. 6). The majority of the superintendents believed building trust with key stakeholders is critical in accomplishing change. The participants felt that authentic work experiences helped them build trust. Superintendent 13 described building trust as making a deposit at a bank, and sometimes you need to make a withdrawal, so you better have made some deposits in the trust bank. Furthermore, Superintendent 13 stated:

No, I just feel like any superintendent to be successful just has to . . . you’ve got to build trust, you’ve got to communicate, and you got to celebrate. Trust, communicate, celebrate, and that’s the end care. Those are the things that are non-negotiables, and you can’t fake those things. (p. 13)

Superintendent participants believed another way to build trust was to share leadership responsibilities with administrators and teacher leaders. Shared responsibility within their organizations lead to a higher level of trust.

Distributive leadership. For the purposes of this study, distributive leadership is a leadership practice that examines the interdependency between school superintendents and their subordinates. The interdependency often creates trust. Many of the school superintendents explained distributive leadership as critical to the success of their school district. For example, “I am very blessed to have a couple teacher leaders that are serving

as administrators of the RTI process and the data-driven decision-making process” (Superintendent 1, p. 1). The interdependency of school district success was evident between the teachers and school administrators:

We discovered very quickly that there’s no way administrators were going to be able to do this work. Not only were their plates already full, but a teacher leader brings with him or her the credibility of a classroom teacher without the supervisory hat. (Superintendent 1, p. 2)

Additionally, Superintendent 1 reflected, “I don’t know how districts can do it without finding leaders; they are specifically targeting this. You know those teacher leaders were critical, absolutely critical, in driving this work” (p. 3). According to Superintendent 1, empowering teachers relieved teacher frustration.

You know adults . . . but it’s mainly because I think there’s a lot of frustration that there are people that are ready and prepared to have more influence that feel stuck. You know, I think that’s half the problem. You know you got to figure out ways to divide the leadership opportunities so that everybody feels like they are contributing. (p. 4)

The theme of distributive leadership and promoting innovative implementation was also shared by Superintendent 2. When referring to teacher instructional coaches, Superintendent 2 stated:

The hope is to use them as coaches, but I don’t know if they’ve had enough of it themselves to become experts in it. These were some of teachers that were selected as leaders that went through the peer coaching piece. And so, we tried to get a cohort of folks that were trained in the coaching model, the peer coaching

model, into th[ese] thinking strategies hoping that this would be the strategy that they would do the coaching in. (p. 3)

Distributive leadership also provided the other school administrators with a leadership role. The superintendents' ability to increase the capacity of building leaders was extremely important. The interdependency between superintendent leaders and other school administrator subordinates was critical. According to Superintendent 2, "you know, one of my principals actually did some work, when he was in a different district, did some work with this organization years ago, so it kind of brought us home to this" (p. 1). Similarly, in another example of distributive leadership, Superintendent 9 spoke about how critical it is to give other administrators an opportunity to lead:

I think for the building principals who had been so ingrained, I think to some degree, it was certainly refreshing and took a certain weight off their shoulders. And I think [they] have taken that very positively and really have . . . you know, the reality is they're making these goals happen. I can't do it from my office; they can. (p. 3)

In this example, Superintendent 14 empowered other district administrators to move forward with data teams. Superintendent 14 stated, "The other huge part of this is that the principals are now leading data team meetings at the building levels" (p. 2). Superintendent participants believed data knowledge by all leaders was critical in their organizations growth.

Category 2: data knowledge. The second category, balanced data system, emerged as a multidimensional category. The meaning of a balanced data system is based on the interviews of the participants. A balanced data system was defined as the

ability of a school superintendent to embed systems that use quantitative and qualitative data to inform decision making. The theme in the balanced data system category is the use of multiple data points. The dimensions and properties of qualitative and quantitative were also added to add clarity and create a deep understanding of the participants' experiences.

The participants' descriptions highlighted a level of understanding of data knowledge. Using multiple data points was a theme encompassing the importance of using multiple data sources. The multiple data points included qualitative and quantitative data.

Many of the superintendents had a multidimensional understanding of data. All of the superintendent participants emphasized the use of multiple data points as an important practice. Specifically, many of the superintendents spoke about measuring student growth with both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, "we're very much data driven, very much are users of student performance information, but we don't leave it at that as the sole indicator" (Superintendent 1, p. 1). When speaking about using standardized measures, Superintendent 1 stated, "that provides us with a student growth percentile which we do use. I'd say it's a strong indicator for us. But that's just one indicator. You know we also use classroom assessments. I use anecdotal information" (p. 1). When speaking about using multiple data points, Superintendent 1 stated, "We were using three indicators that we could use for triangulation. One is STAR, one [is] the quarterly assessments of data, and one is classroom performance indicated by either anecdotal information or by grades" (p. 2). Superintendent 1 spoke about redefining the word data. "What I use now with my teachers is anything you receive from sensory

experiences. So to have teachers understand that they are constantly being bombarded with data, and in a matter of a nanosecond, they're making a decision on that" (p. 3).

Superintendent 1's multidimensional understanding of data has led this district to define broadly the use of data. Superintendent 2 shared the same sentiments:

I think we've got to find a way to measure that subjective data especially in this area of accountability and everybody's so worried about teachers' growth scores and all that kind of stuff. I don't know how you measure that but I think it's vitally important. (p. 1)

For Superintendent 3, a multidimensional approach that includes measuring the social-emotional growth of students is critical. "Social-emotionally, we try to look at the student survey as one of the things. So that gives us some insight on how are we doing with our social-emotional health in growth as they develop" (Superintendent 3, p. 1).

Superintendent 14 also spoke about the socio-emotional state of students:

You know, I think you look at social-emotional growth, and I can measure that by their performance with their peers, by how they respond to direction from teachers, and how they handle themselves in sometimes stressful situations. I think that's a sign of their growth and maturity. (p. 1)

Superintendent 4 used a multidimensional approach to define student growth as:

Student growth is progress—social, emotional, and intellectual. I think the fuller the picture you have of, you know, where students are at one point and who they are, and then, what does that look like down the road the better. (p. 1)

Also, Superintendent 4 spoke about the use of qualitative and quantitative data.

I tend to look also at student discipline. That's another form of data that is a little more quantitative anyway. And then there's the more anecdotal or qualitative kinds of things. That's a little trickier but trying to pay attention to, like, our musical and drama program. But there's no perfect way, you know, you got to try and create a profile. (p. 1)

When speaking about multidimensional data use, Superintendent 6 stated, "Well, [with] student bodies, you can certainly look at things like attendance. You can look at things like discipline records. You can look at participation in athletics and extracurricular activities" (p. 1). Speaking about New York State exams, Superintendent 6 stated:

Certainly performance on the state tests. I pay particular attention to the Regents exams. I like to check, although I find (at times), there's less correlation of how a cohort has performed on the 3-8 tests science tests as opposed to the Regents exams. (p. 1)

Speaking about using multiple data points, Superintendent 7 shared, "We take a lot of pride in gathering a lot of data on students, and that's done throughout the school year and those are multiple data points" (p. 1). According to Superintendent 9, the use of one data point was problematic:

Well, it's an interesting question and one that I think we struggle with because the most common format of measuring student growth tends to be test scores. And while that's nice and it provides one means of data, one data point, certainly of late that seems to be the only one that anyone pays any attention to which becomes a struggle instructionally. (p. 1)

Superintendent 9 believed in using a multidimensional approach to using student data. “But somewhere that has to be a marriage between some true data points that we use from showing some growth in a more formalized manner as well as the subjectivity (Superintendent 9, p. 1). Superintendent 10 believed educators should remind all stakeholders about the complexities of measuring student growth:

The answer to that comes in a lot of different fashions and it’s certainly much more than just an isolated test score. So, I think you need to look at it. It’s multifaceted. And I think from the perception of educators and the perception of the public and the perception of parents, we need to remind people that it’s multifaceted. (p. 1)

Superintendent 12 shared the same sentiments by stating, “Well, I think student growth, that’s really very broad, and it shouldn’t be looked at in a narrow sense that it’s all about standardized tests or even the state tests” (p.1). Superintendent 13 believed state assessments measure student growth; however, classroom observations are important. Superintendent 2 shared concerns about measuring students’ skills solely with standardized tests. Superintendent 2 stated:

They don’t measure creativity at all. They don’t measure the ability for kids to think. They really are not good indicators of whether or not a kid can write his or her thoughts. So as we talk about growth my fear is that we don’t have ways to measure those skills which are really, really, really important skills. (p. 1)

Category 3: Systems thinking. The third category, system thinking, emerged as a multifaceted category. Systems thinking was an understanding of an organization and how all of the parts interrelate with one another. The themes in the systems thinking

category were strategic planning, explicit professional development, and stimulating a learning culture. Superintendents who create school-wide systems help all students reach their full potential (Drago-Severson et al., 2015). The dimensions and properties of embedded processes, cultivating intended skills, and leading change were added for clarity and create a deep understanding of the participants' experiences.

The participants' descriptions highlighted a level of understanding of systems thinking. Strategic planning was a theme encompassing the importance of using a systems approach to school improvement. Explicit professional development is a theme incorporating training in a specific area for teachers and administrators. Stimulating a learning culture was described as, "an environment that is flexible enough and open enough when someone inside has a good idea, it can spread" (Superintendent 6, p. 3). Superintendent participants believe the process of strategic planning helps them understand their school district better and how all parts of are interrelated.

Strategic planning. Strategic planning is a collaborative process that results in a multi-year plan to improve school district outcomes. All 14 superintendents spoke about their strategic planning process. Superintendent 13 described the strategic planning process concerning inclusivity in the collaborative process.

We reach out to the entire community, including everybody, everyone you can think of gets marketed to respond to a survey that we have about our strategic plan and our focus areas; what they think we should look at, what they think we have missing, if they think we've hit the targets. (p. 2)

Superintendent 13 also spoke about the importance of the strategic plan as a way to reveal the interdependency between school budget, human resource, and professional development.

When you're coming up with initiatives that you really want to achieve in the strategic plan; understanding am I going to be able to have the financial resources and human resources and professional development behind whatever initiative that is that's going. (p. 1)

There were variations in the implementation process amongst the superintendent participants. Superintendent 14 stated:

We have a strategic plan that someone interviewed me yesterday about how did we arrive at our strategic plan. And I said, "You know, I've been in districts in which strategic plans were developed over the course of a year with numerous stakeholder groups and many meetings at night throughout the year." I said, "Last summer, the board and I sat down and said what are our priorities?" That's it, we did it. We created a strategic plan. (p. 2)

While Superintendent 13 stated:

It's a 2-day thing every year, and then what we say, and what I have ingrained in everybody, is if something makes it to the strategic planning document, it's going to be reflected in the budget, because we're going to provide resources to it. (p. 3)

During the interview, Superintendent 10 shared the difficulty of using the words "strategic planning":

You know, I walked into this position after some rough times in the district. And the person that was here before me attempted to put together a strategic plan and

that whole process did not go well to say the least. And to this day, you know, 2 and a half years later, almost 3 years later, we still can't use the term "strategic plan." It's not part of our vocabulary around here, because it has such a negative connotation to it. (p. 1)

However, Superintendent 10 spoke about importance of creating common goals:

Our district steering committee, which is comprised of teachers and administrators, my superintendents' advisory council, which is business and community people, principals, directors, my student group. And once we kind of brainstormed what we thought we wanted to be about, we looked for common themes, and I'm really kind of rushing through the process. You know, I mean there were a lot of steps and it was a whole year's worth. (p. 1)

According to Superintendent 3, strategic planning helped drive multi-year goals.

Coming out the other end of the fall, they've been able to create with their team, or at least revise their building strategic plan, and then present on it. And then comes the budget process the following year. It's a multi-year issue that they're working on. (p. 4)

Superintendent 15 referred to the district strategic plan as a comprehensive district educational plan (CDEP). The relationship between the Board of Education's goals and the CDEP plan was critical. Superintendent 15 stated, "Yeah, well we start with the CDEP committee in talking about needs. So everything goes back to our board goals. It goes back to our comprehensive district educational plan so it has to fit in" (p. 2). Many of the participants spoke about the strategic plan as a way to focus professional development offerings for administrators and teachers.

Explicit professional development. Explicit professional development is training in a specific area for teachers and administrators. All of the superintendents described providing professional development as critical to the success of their school district. Speaking about cultivating intended skill development with professional development, Superintendent 1 stated:

To answer on . . . where we are now, we have four early-release days specifically for data-driven conversations to get the community to understand that it's that important to us. Every quarter we're going to let the kids go home early, and we're just going to work on our PLC's on data-driven conversations. Huge. (p. 3)

Superintendent 2 believed in cultivating intended skills by providing specific professional development (PD) by the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC).

They defined it through PEBC. And, you know, we took that data, we figured out where the perceived weaknesses were, and then we kind of compared the perceived weaknesses and strengths with the data. There were some similarities, and there were some huge differences. It really helped us to hone in on where we wanted to spend some of our time with PD work. (p. 9)

When reflecting on cultivating intended skills with professional development opportunities, Superintendent 2 stated:

In terms of the financial commitment, you know, we spend a lot in PD every year anyway. This was just really a way to get us more focused on to one particular strategy rather than I'm going to go attend this, I'm going to attend this, I'm going to attend this. I don't think that model works anymore. (p. 4)

Superintendent 3 spoke about professional development support by, “It’s pretty robust. We have a half-time teacher on special assignment whose sole job is professional development, analyzing needs” (p. 6). Superintendent 4 had concerns about non-specific professional development:

What they said to me was, “Why does Fabius always beat us?” I said, “Well, I can tell you in a year, but here’s my suspicion.” And a big part of it is focus. We’re doing 47 different things, and you can’t be good at one thing if you’re doing 47 different things and they still are having trouble with that. (p. 3)

Superintendent 14 believed specific professional development is key. “We started a phonemic-awareness support group. We hired a company out of Ithaca to come and film her doing explanations and training on phonemic awareness, so now my staff can access those videos at any time” (Superintendent 14, p. 2). Superintendent 5 emphasized the importance of being strategic by stating, “Again, we use Title I money, you know, try to strategically use that to provide professional development” (p. 2). When speaking about the different sources of professional development, Superintendent 6 stated, “I mean, it’s almost flooded with information So, just trying to figure out what to pay attention to becomes more of a challenge” (p. 2).

Superintendent 12 believed in cultivating intended skills by providing specific professional development for administrators. Superintendent 12 stated:

You know, a lot of it was just old-fashion nudging, encouraging from building principals trying to get staff members to be willing to go to some training, take it on. We also did some administrative-specific training on PBL [project-based learning] because the other part of that requires the leadership. If you’re going to

lead that initiative, you darn well better understand what it is you're leading.
(p. 2)

Superintendent participants believed explicit professional development can lead to creating a learning in their school districts. Explicit professional development helps shape a school districts learning culture.

Stimulating a learning culture. Stimulating a learning culture was, “creating an environment that is flexible enough and open enough when someone inside has a good idea, it can spread” (Superintendent 6, p. 3). When speaking about culture shifts, Superintendent 2 stated, “I’m trying to change an institution, and I’m not just talking about this district but public education institutions; when we try to institute any kind of change it’s a long, drawn-out process. So patience” (p. 5). The other superintendent participants felt culture shifts take time. Superintendent 4 stated, “That’s something I read on a bumper sticker; here you go, this is what you want right? So it’s trying to change the nature of the conversation. It takes time” (p. 3). Additionally, Superintendent 9 stated, “I think one of the pieces that has been time consuming for me since coming here has really been a cultural shift” (p. 2). When speaking about culture change and the strategic planning process, Superintendent 9 shared, “It was a huge culture shift, and actually, with the board, it was a fascinating process to go through. And to their credit, they were very open to it” (p. 2). Also, when shifting a culture, “I think you shift culture by really trying to get . . . at their belief systems” (Superintendent 10, p. 3).

The superintendent participants also believed critical conversations challenge belief systems. When speaking passionately about the tradition of teacher appreciation day, Superintendent 13 stated:

I said, “Bullshit,” pardon me, when I got here, I said, “There’s no way we’re doing that.” I said [a] food service worker is just as important as me. We’re all working with children, and we’re all making connections because that’s the bottom line of it. So, A, we’re not doing cookies anymore. So, I said, B, I said, “We’re going to create one-staff appreciation day and you are all going to come in and you’re going to go to the bus garage, the custodians, the teachers, and you’re going to shake all their hands and you’re going to say thank you to them.” That’s what we do today, and they received it well. The board loves doing it, and all the staff love being recognized. It’s a quick 20 minutes. They like it. And that’s a shift though. (p. 6)

According to Superintendent 14, shifting culture was a complex problem. “Using data as your jumping-off point, and building relationships with your key stakeholders would probably be the way too over-simplified way of stating that’s how I get a culture ready for change” (Superintendent 14, p. 3). When speaking about school culture, Superintendent 1 believed:

I don’t think you create a culture ready for change, you find out where they are. So you need to understand where people are on this continuum, and meet them where they are so that you could move them. So you can’t prescribe an intervention for adults if they’re not ready for that on the continuum. (p. 3)

The superintendent participants agreed that changing culture takes time. Building trust and relationships with stakeholders helps foster a change in culture.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop a conceptual theory that examined school superintendents' commitment to student growth. The collective experiences of the school superintendent participants led to the emerging theory of *leadership for student growth*. The three categories and 10 themes that emerged from the data and were discussed in this chapter were: first, trust, incorporated the two themes of: (a) critical conversations, and (b) distributive leadership. The second category, balanced data system, incorporated the theme of the use of multiple data points. The final category, systems thinking, incorporated three themes of: (a) strategic planning, (b) explicit professional development, and (c) stimulating a learning culture. All categories and themes related to answering the following two research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics, behaviors and actions do superintendents demonstrate that lead to student growth?
2. What are the school district conditions superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth?

The final chapter discusses the further findings of the study. The emerging theory of *leadership for student growth* is discussed as well as the limitations and the implications of the research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to discover superintendent leaders' characteristics, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate a commitment to student growth. This study emphasized common characteristics of superintendent leaders who created conditions that promoted student growth in their organizations. Information gained from this study informs superintendent leaders about their professional practice, and it develops a leadership model that promotes student growth.

Understanding superintendent leaders' characteristics, behaviors, and actions that create conditions to promote student growth led to the creation of a conceptual model. This theory, *leadership for student growth*, describes the interconnectedness between building trust, systems thinking, and having balanced data within the context of K-12 schools. The development of major categories, themes and dimensions, and properties are discussed. Implications for superintendent leaders are explored; as well, the limitations of the study and recommendations are discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Successful leadership practices create a school culture that embraces change (Honig, 2009). This change leads to long-range improvements in student achievement and growth. Superintendent leaders build the capacity of their school systems to embrace change in the school improvement process (Fullan, 2005). This study explored the experiences of superintendent leaders who created the capacity for their school systems to

embrace change, as well as built an understanding of superintendent leaders' characteristics, behaviors, and actions that lead to student growth.

There have been several legislative actions to improve education in the United States of America. In 1965, the federal government began to entice school districts with federal dollars. A federal law referred to as the Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Act (EASA) incentivized states to pay particular attention to underachieving students (McDonnell, 2005). One billion dollars were disseminated to provide services to students in need of remediation (Thomas & Brady, 2005). In 1988, President George Bush revised Title 1 to require states to measure the levels of achievement of economically disadvantaged children (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Later in the 1990s, Dianne Ravitch, Assistant Secretary of the United States Department of Education (USDE), further stressed the idea of school accountability (Wilder et al., 2008). As a result, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) tied student performance to school district accountability. In the 2005-06 school year, NCLB required every state to test all students in Grades 3-8 in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics (Wilder et al., 2008). The goal of NCLB was that by 2015, all students would reach proficiency in ELA and math. Despite the United States' focus on school accountability, evidence of student growth remains limited (Dunn et al., 2014).

This qualitative study answers the following research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics, behaviors and actions do superintendents demonstrate that lead to student growth?
2. What are the school district conditions superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth?

A grounded research theory approach was employed to answer the research questions. This research provides findings to these questions in an effort to inform leaders in their professional practice, resulting in the emerging theory of *leadership for student growth*.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory consists of flexible systematic guidelines that enable researchers to focus on their data to produce theory. Grounded theory methodology provided a set of procedures that resulted in the development of a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This constant comparative method of qualitative research examined school superintendents' behavior in their school districts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). This grounded theory research involved coding empirical data and working with the resultant codes to construct a conceptual theory (Charmaz, 2011). This grounded theory study was used to develop a theory about school superintendents who remain committed to student growth, and intends to help school superintendents improve their practice. The use of grounded theory methodology, resulted in the emerging theory of *leadership for student growth*.

The interviews were with superintendent leaders in the OCM BOCES and the OHM BOCES regions in Central New York. The purposeful sample was taken from rural and suburban school district superintendents across the OCM and OHM BOCES regions. For this research, 32 superintendents were invited to be a part of the study via email. As a result, 15 one-on-one school superintendent interviews were conducted. The study participants agreed to the in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews in their school districts. Each participant was asked to sign the St. John Fisher College-approved IRB consent form, which informed them that the interviews would result in a written transcript.

Implications of Findings

This inquiry involved the study of school superintendent leadership. Specifically, through the lens of studying the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of school superintendents, as well as their ability to create conditions which lead to student growth. The process of school superintendents remaining committed to student growth is depicted in the conceptual theory entitled *leadership for student growth* (Figure 5.1). This model represents school superintendents' characteristics, behaviors, and actions, as well as their ability to create conditions that lead to student growth. This model depicts the school superintendent participants' individual responses, as well as it examines the interdependency between multiple layers of the qualitative data.

Categories embedded in this model are: (a) trust, (b) balanced data system, and (c) systems thinking. These categories are further explained in six themes: (a) critical conversations, (b) distributive leadership, (c) multiple data points, (d) strategic planning, (e) explicit professional development, and (f) stimulating a learning culture. Furthermore, dimensions and properties are identified as: (a) planting the seed, (b) promoting innovative implementation, (c) multi-dimensional understanding, (e) embedded process, (f) cultivating intended skills, and (g) leading change.

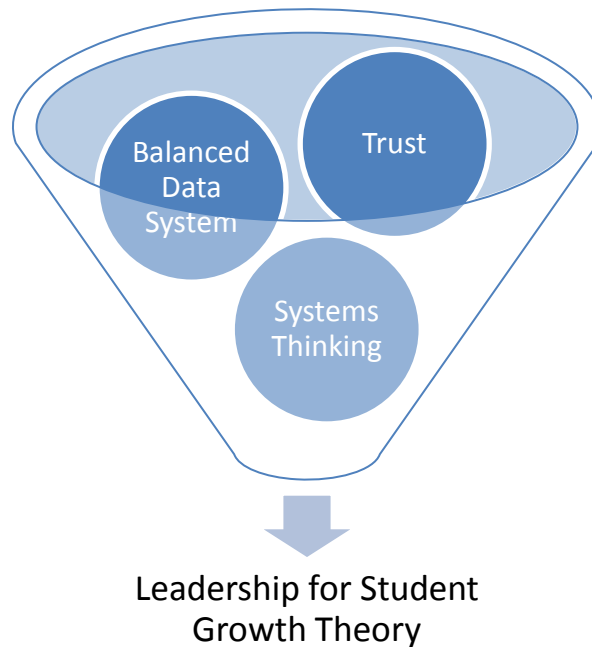


Figure 5.1. Conceptual Theory of Leadership for Student Growth.

The first category, *trust*, was described by participants as a confidence from the school community that a school superintendent earns over a period of time. Kouzes and Posner (2012) identified 20 characteristics of exceptional leaders. The greatest indicator of exceptional leaders was honesty. Being seen as an honest leader creates trust. When speaking about leading the change process, Superintendent 13 stated, “So, the change piece, I don’t think you can do anything at all without building trust ahead of time” (p. 5). Superintendent 12 stated, “You have to build trust and that’s critical” (p. 1) to be effective as a school superintendent. Throughout the interviews, the majority of the superintendents believed that trust grows over time. For example, “You plant seeds for, like, smaller ones from, like, 6 months to a year” (Superintendent 13, p. 4).

To build trust, the superintendents referred to critical conversations as an important step in building stakeholder trust. Critical conversations are a way of planting seeds for a shift in a culture and/or thinking to occur. When reflecting on critical

conversations, Superintendent 9 stated, “Really, it takes stepping back and having conversations about what do we value” (p. 2). In order to develop a change in culture, Superintendent 9 believed having uncomfortable conversations make change occur (p. 2).

Superintendents should promote trust between themselves and all employees by including all stakeholders (Devos et al., 2007). Distributive leadership is a way to involve all stakeholders. Distributive leadership is a leadership practice that examines the interdependency between school superintendents and their subordinates. The majority of the school superintendents felt the interdependency nature of practicing distributive leadership created trust. Many of the school superintendents explained distributive leadership as critical to the success of their school district. Several different research studies share those same sentiments; sentiments involving stakeholders’ results in greater acceptance during the change process (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Also, a superintendent who routinely involves stakeholders in the decision-making process leads to greater student growth (Toprak & Summak, 2014).

The superintendent participants routinely involved stakeholders in the decision making. For example, “I am very blessed to have a couple teacher leaders that are serving as administrators of the RTI process and the data driven decision making process” (Superintendent 1, p. 1). Leaders’ ability to increase the capacity of building leaders and teachers is extremely important (Hallinger, 2010). Additionally, when speaking about the importance of teacher involvement, Superintendent 1 reflected, “You know, those teacher leaders were critical, absolutely critical in driving this work” (p. 3).

The theme of creating trust through the practice of distributive leadership was shared by the majority of the superintendent participants when speaking about other

school administrators. The superintendent participants' believed that the ability to increase the capacity of building leaders was extremely important. The interdependency between the superintendent leaders and other school administrator subordinates was critical. Superintendent 9 spoke about how critical it was to give other administrators an opportunity to lead: "You know, the reality is they're making these goals happen. I can't do it from my office, they can." (p. 3). In another example of distributive leadership, Superintendent 14 empowered district administrators to move forward on data teams. Superintendent 14 stated, "The other huge part of this is that the principals are now leading data team meetings at the building levels (p. 2).

Several research studies have concluded that trust is an absolute critical factor for change to occur (Devos et al., 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). The majority of the participants also indicated trust as a key factor for successful superintendent leaders. Some of the tools to build trust included having critical conversations and the practice of distributive leadership. When speaking about the relationship between trust and change, Superintendent 13 believed that, "Those are the things that are non-negotiables" (p. 13), if someone wants to be a successful school superintendent.

The second category in the model, *balanced data system*, was a collective understanding of how to assess student growth. The superintendent participants emphasized the importance of using multiple ways to assess student growth. Research suggests new levels of assessment, including benchmark, interim, and common assessments, lead to a balanced data system (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009). Using data from these type of assessments led to better decision making. Furthermore,

the superintendent participants believed in a multi-dimensional definition of student growth.

Many of the participants spoke about measuring student growth in multiple ways. Research indicates periodic ongoing classroom assessments, interim benchmark, and annual state assessments represent a balanced data system (Chappuis et al., 2009). All of the superintendent participants concurred that state assessment scores should not be the sole indicator. For example, “We’re very much data driven, very much are users of student performance information, but we don’t leave it at that as the sole indicator” (Superintendent 1, p. 1). Superintendent 1’s multi-dimensional understanding of data has led their school district to broadly define the use of data. Superintendent 2 shared the same sentiments by stating, “I think we’ve got to find a way to measure that subjective, data especially in this area of accountability . . . I don’t know how you measure that, but I think it’s vitally important” (p. 1). Having a balanced data system that includes ongoing classroom assessments, interim benchmark, and annual state assessments leads to accurately measuring students’ growth in a variety of ways.

For Superintendent 3, a multi-dimensional approach that includes measuring the social-emotional growth of students is critical. “Social-emotionally, we try to look at the student survey as one of the things. So, that gives us some insight on how are we doing with our social-emotional health in growth as they develop” (Superintendent 3, p. 1). Superintendent 14 also spoke about the socio-emotional state of students in terms of how students handle themselves in stressful situations. “I think that’s a sign of their growth and maturity” (p. 1). When speaking about multi-dimensional data use, Superintendent 6 stated, “Well, [with] student bodies, you can certainly look at things like attendance. You

can look at things like discipline records. You can look at participation in athletics and extracurricular activities” (p. 1).

Summarizing, Superintendent 12 shared the similar sentiments by stating, “Well, I think student growth, that’s really very broad, and it shouldn’t be looked at in a narrow sense; that it’s all about standardized tests or even the state tests” (p.1). Superintendent 13 believed classroom observations are another critical data point. “I think test scores measure growth, but I also think that the authentic piece of being in classrooms and actually watching them perform multiple tasks from a start to a finish is important” (Superintendent 13, p. 1). Research agrees with this statement, citing the balanced data system includes purposeful observations by teachers to inform instructional practice (Chappuis et al., 2009). A well-planned, balanced data system offers different types of data to teachers, principals, and school superintendents to make the best decisions possible for student success.

The third category of *leadership for student growth* is *systems thinking*. Derived from superintendent interviews, systems thinking involves long-term planning through strategic planning, provides explicit professional development to support the strategic plan, and creates a learning culture. “All school districts have great visions. What most don’t have is a systematic strategy for getting there” (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, p. 242). Successful change implementation requires a plan (Honig, 2009). Research concludes that superintendents who have strategic plans have greater success during the change process (Dulaney et al. 2013). Many of the superintendents suggested that strategic planning helped drive multi-year goals. For example, Superintendent 4 stated, “they’ve been able to . . . revise their building strategic plan . . . and then comes the budget process

the following year. It's a multi-year issues that they're working on" (p. 4). Also, Superintendent 13 spoke about the importance of the strategic plan as a way to reveal the interdependency between school budget, human resource, and professional development.

When you're coming up with initiatives that you really want to achieve in the strategic plan, understanding, "am I going to be able to have the financial resources and human resources and professional development behind whatever initiative that is that's going?" (p. 1)

There were variations in the implementation process among the superintendent participants. Superintendent 13 spoke about an annual 2-day process with all stakeholders including students, community groups, administrators, and teachers. Superintendent 15 spoke about meeting with their board of education for 2 hours and completing their strategic plan. Although the superintendent participants had varying degrees of completing their strategic plans, all 15 superintendents had a strategic planning process. Hallinger (2010) concludes that students learn and grow best when the school superintendent explicitly identifies values and goals. All of the participants had goal setting as an essential part of their strategic planning process. Through the creation of their goals superintendent leaders planned for specific professional development.

According to Dulaney et al. (2013), sustainable change by school superintendents should develop a common language and provide opportunities for explicit professional development. When speaking about explicit professional development opportunities. Superintendent 2 stated:

You know, we spend a lot in PD every year anyway. This was just really a way to get us more focused on one particular strategy, rather than I'm going to go attend

this, I'm going to attend this, I'm going to attend this. I don't think that model works anymore. (p. 4)

Additionally, Superintendent 1 stated, "and to answer as to where we are now, we have four early release days specifically for data-driven conversations" (p. 3). Through strategic planning, providing opportunities for explicit professional development, and stimulating a learning culture, the school superintendents have created school-wide systems that help students reach their full potential.

Leadership for student growth theory has implications for current and future school superintendent leaders. As a result of this qualitative inquiry creating trust, a balanced data system, and systems thinking are all critical elements for student growth.

Limitations

Grounded theory research provides opportunities for a tried-and-true set of procedures for creating theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However, with any research methodology, there are limitations. A convenience sample was used in this research. The choice of a convenience sample of suburban and rural superintendents limits the generalizability for small city and urban school superintendents. Also, the setting of this study centered in Central New York, which also limits generalizability. The larger the population of participants, the more generalizable the findings, thus 15 superintendent participants limited this study. In fact, any single qualitative study may have difficulty with generalizability because of the nature of the sample size (Myers, 2000).

The researcher has had the role of providing professional development to many districts in this study, thus he already had a relationship with the superintendent

participants. To reduce bias, member checking was employed as a means of creating a reliable data set. Also, it is possible that the researcher's prior relationships influenced the participants' responses or analysis of the data set.

This study was also limited by time. A larger research window would have allowed for multiple interviews, thus the preliminary theory may have included further complexity and additional layers of data. Also, with more time, the research would have included an in-depth review of district documents. The in-depth document review may have prompted more specific questions during the interview process. In addition, the participants' demographic information was not included in the study. One participant suggested the results should include years of experience as a variable.

Recommendations

Results of this study suggest school superintendent leadership includes the practices of creating trust, develop an understanding of a balanced data system, and a construct a systems way of thinking. There are specific implications for school superintendents as a result of this study. Those who develop trust, a balanced data system, and think systematically will likely create conditions for each student to reach his or her full potential. Implications for current and future superintendent leaders about their professional practice are included. To conclude, recommendations for future research are discussed.

Implications for professional practice. There are well documented studies about effective executive leadership practices. For example, Devos et al. (2007) suggested that when history and trust are low, the likelihood of a successful change diminishes. Conversely, Devos et al. (2007) indicated that a high level of trust in

executive management increases the chances of a successful change. Furthermore, empirical analysis by Kouzes and Posner (2012) identified honesty as the number one factor in admired executive leaders. Lessons from the *leadership for student growth* theory suggest school superintendents should have critical conversations and implement a model of distributive leadership to create an interdependency, thus creating a high level of trust. Also, the interdependency that produces a high level of trust is dependent on interactions between school superintendents and their stakeholder groups.

To further develop their leadership skills, the *leadership for student growth* theory suggests school superintendents think in terms of creating school district systems, such as implementing a strategic planning process. The Dulaney et al. (2013) study findings suggest that school superintendents who have a strategic plan have greater success. Other school district systems should include opportunities for explicit professional development and creating a learning culture. When discussing strategic planning, many of the participants spoke about the outcomes, which included ideas for specific professional development. As a result, the *leadership for student growth* theory suggests it is critical to provide professional development that is focused on achieving school district goals related to student growth.

Last, the *leadership for student growth* theory suggests school superintendents create a balanced data system. A balanced data system encompasses multiple data points and a multi-dimensional understanding of student growth. The multi-dimensional understanding of student growth includes qualitative and quantitative data. When discussing data use, many of the participants shared concerns that the current definition of student growth only includes standardized test scores. Superintendent 1 stated, “We

need to do a better job of educating the public about defining student growth” (p. 3). As a result, the *leadership for student growth* theory suggests creating a multi-dimensional understanding of student growth for all stakeholders. Through the strategic planning process defining the term “student growth” will create a stakeholder understanding of academic and socio-emotional needs of students.

Implications for future research. The participants in this study came from a relatively small geographic region in Central New York. Each superintendent participant was from a rural or suburban school district. The resulting theory, *leadership for student growth*, is based on 15 school superintendents in this small region; therefore, the study is limited. Including superintendent leaders from other regions, as well as small and large city school districts, would provide further support for this emerging theory.

In addition to expanding the geographic region and including small and large city school districts, the results for this study suggest a deeper understanding of the relationship between novice and experienced school superintendents. The relationship between superintendent leaders’ years of service and their ability to accomplish district goals should be explored. The category of building trust seems to be related to years of service. Further research should be explored to investigate the relationship between superintendent years of service and trust.

Educational professionals outside of the role of school superintendent might benefit from the emerging theory of *leadership for student growth*. This study could be adapted to include all educational leaders and those in other school district leadership positions or building-level leaders.

Conclusion

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What leadership characteristics, behaviors and actions do superintendents demonstrate that lead to student growth?
2. What are the school district conditions superintendents create that lead to continuous student growth?

Research suggests that some school superintendents have a greater impact on student learning. The challenge is measuring why these superintendents have an impact on student learning (Chingos et al., 2014). In an effort to inform leaders in their professional practice, this study captured the characteristics, behaviors, and actions of superintendents who have positively impacted student learning. In addition, superintendent improvement strategies, such as having a systems approach, were a component of this qualitative grounded theory study.

Summary. Leadership has a significant effect on creating conditions that promote student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013). There should be more research on how successful leaders create conditions within their school districts to promote student growth (Leithwood et al., 2004). Also, it is difficult to clearly identify superintendent leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions that create conditions that promote student growth. Superintendents who create school-wide systems that focus on student learning help all students reach their full potential (Drago-Severson et al., 2015). Understanding the leadership characteristics, behaviors, and actions superintendents possess, and their commitment to student growth, became the focus of this qualitative research.

Review of the literature. The literature suggests superintendent leaders can create conditions that promote student growth (Gu & Day, 2013; Honig, 2009; Whitney et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it is difficult to measure why school superintendent leaders have positive effects on student growth (Chingos et al., 2014). Correspondingly, research is lacking on how effective superintendents create conditions that result in positively impacting student growth (Heck & Hallinger, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004). The literature review focused on superintendent leadership and identified school-wide systems that impact student growth. Superintendent leadership and creating school-wide systems for growth are significant factors that help all students reach their full potential. Overall, the literature review assisted in solidifying the research questions and choosing a grounded theory methodology for this research.

Research design methodology. Grounded theory is a constant comparative method for doing qualitative research. It is an iterative process that depends on a set of procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory consists of flexible methodical guidelines that enable researchers to focus on their data to produce theory. The procedures in grounded theory help researchers study new and emerging areas that are in need of investigation. Studying leadership is not a new phenomenon; however, being able to identify characteristics, behaviors, and actions of school superintendents who contribute to student success is a new concept. Grounded theory allows new concepts to be studied while creating an emerging theory. There were four steps in the data collection and analysis of this study: initial coding, category development, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). The final step created the emerging theory of *leadership for student growth*. This

theoretical explanation was the overarching logic that explained how superintendent leaders influence student growth.

Findings and discussion. As a result of the four steps in data collection and analysis three categories emerged: (a) trust, (b) balanced data system, and (c) systems thinking. The first category, trust, was described by participants as a confidence from the school community a school superintendent earns over a period of time. The contributing themes were having critical conversations and practicing distributive leadership. The dimensions and properties of trust include planting a seed and promoting innovative implementation. Planting a seed is a proactive approach to making change. Promoting innovative implementation refers to the practice of empowering others to be a significant part of a change initiative.

The second category, balanced data system, included the use of multiple data points and a multi-dimensional understanding of student growth. The multi-dimensional understanding of student growth included the extensive use of qualitative and quantitative data.

The third category, systems thinking, was an understanding of an organization and how all parts interrelated with one another. The themes in the systems thinking category were strategic planning, explicit professional development, and stimulating a learning culture. The dimensions and properties of systems thinking were embedded process, cultivating intended skills, and leading change, which were added for clarity and to create a deep understanding of the participants' experiences.

This study used initial coding, category development, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). The final step created a

theory. The theory began with concepts that evolved, but then had linkages made between the concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This led to the development of three core categories: trust, balanced data system, and systems thinking. From these categories and concepts derived from the data, the theoretical explanation emerged: *leadership for student growth*. *Leadership for student growth* was the overarching logic that explained how superintendent leaders influenced student growth. To ensure the legitimacy of this qualitative inquiry, memo writing, diagramming, and member checking were employed. Significant in vivo quotes from the superintendent participants were reported to add to the depth and richness of the study.

There are well documented studies about effective executive leadership practices. Devos et al. (2007) indicated that a high level of trust in executive management increases the chances of a successful change. The *leadership for student growth* theory suggests creating trust, creating a balanced data system, and being a systems thinker for current and future school superintendents. These actions will increase the probability for students to reach their full potential.

References

- Bailey, K., Jakicic, C., & Spiller, J. (2013). *Collaborating for success with the common core*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Barron, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2008). Teaching for meaningful learning: A review of research on inquiry-based and cooperative learning. In K. Gagnon, & L. Iwa (Eds.) *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Beer, M., & Nohria, N. (2000). *Breaking the code of change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Betebenner, D. W. (2009). Norm- and criterion-referenced student growth. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 28, 42-51.
- Betebenner, D., & Linn, R. (2009, December). *Growth in student achievement: Issues of measurement, longitudinal data analysis, and accountability*. Paper presented at Exploratory Seminar: Measurement Challenges Within the Race to the Top Agenda Center for K-12 Assessment & Performance Management, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.k12center.com/rsc/pdf/BetebennerandLinnPresenterSession1.pdf>
- Burnes, B., (2004). Kurt Lewin and the planned to change: A re-appraisal. *Journal of Management Studies*, 41, 978-1001. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6486.2004.00463.x
- Castellano, K. & Ho, A. (2012). Contrasting OLS and quantile regression approaches to student “growth” percentiles. *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statics*. 38, 190-215. doi:10.3102/1076998611435413
- Charmaz, K., (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative research*. London, England: Sage.
- Charmaz, K., (2011). Grounded theory methods in social justice research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 359-380). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chingos, M., Whitehurst, G., & Lindquist, K. (2014). School superintendents: Vital or irrelevant. *Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings*. Retrieved from https://www.heartland.org/sites/default/files/superintendentsbrown_center9314.pdf

- Christensen, C. M., & Horn, M. B. (2008). How do we transform our schools? *Education Next*, 8(3), 1-11. Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/how-do-we-transform-our-schools/>
- Chappuis, S., Chappuis, J., & Stiggins, R. (2009). The quest for quality. *Educational Leadership*, 67, 14-19. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov09/vol67/num03/The-Quest-for-Quality.aspx>
- City, E., Elmore, R., Fiarman, S., & Teitel (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creemers, B., & Reezigt, G. J. (1996). School level conditions affecting the effectiveness of instruction. *School Level Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 7(3), 197-228. doi:10.1080/0924345960070301
- Cripe, E. J. (2012). *Gaining employee commitment to organizational change*. Retrieved from <http://www.workitect.com/PDF/gaining-commitment-organizational-change.pdf>
- Dawson, P. (1994). *Organizational change: A processual approach*. London, England: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Devos, G., Buelens, M., & Bouckenooghe, D. (2007). Contribution of content, context, and process to understanding openness to organizational change: Two experimental simulation studies. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 6, 607-629.
- Drago-Severson, E., Maslin-Ostrowski, P., & Blum-DeStefano, J. (2015, April). *Principals' purpose and passion: A longitudinal look at learning and leading through complex challenges*. Symposium conducted at the American Education Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Dulaney, D., Hallam, P., & Wall, G (2013). Superintendent perceptions of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS): Obstacles and opportunities for school system reform. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 10, 30-46. Retrieved from http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/AASA_Journal_of_Scholarship_and_Practice/JSP_Summer2013.FINAL.pdf#page=30
- Dunn, T., Burman, J., & Beattie J. (2014, December 18). *Statewide high school graduation rate shows continuing gains. Large achievement gaps remain, particularly advanced designation diploma*. Retrieved from

- <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2015/statewide-high-school-graduation-rate-shows-continuing-gains>
- Dunphy, D. D., & Stace, D. A. (1993). The strategic management of corporate change. *Human Relations, 46*(8), 905-918. doi:10.1177/001872679304600801
- Ehlert, M., Koedel, C., Parsons, E., & Podgursky, M. (2014). Choosing the right growth measure. *Education Next, 14*, 66-71.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Sage Publications.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Alidine.
- Hallinger, P. (2010, March). Leadership for learning: What have we learned from 30 years of empirical research. Paper presented at the Principals' Conference, Hong Kong, PRC. Abstract retrieved from <http://libir1.ied.edu.hk/pubdata/ir/link/pub/JEA%203.2%20Conf%20version.pdf>
- Halvorsen, A., Duke, N. K., Brugar, K. A., Block, M. K., Strachan, S. L., Berka, M. B., & Brown, J. M. (2014). Narrowing the achievement gap in second-grade social studies and content area literacy: The promise of a project-based approach. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 40*, 198-229. Retrieved from <http://education.msu.edu/epc/library/papers/WP26.asp>
- Harris, P. R. (1985). *Management in transition*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Heck, R., & Hallinger, P. (2009). Assessing the contribution of distributed leadership to school improvement and growth in math achievement. *American Education Research Association, 46*, 659-689. doi:10.3102/0002831209340042
- Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Herscovitch, L., & Meyer, J. P. (2002). Commitment to organizational change: Extension of a three component model. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 474-487.
- Hinings, C. R., & Greenwood, R. (1989). *The dynamics of strategic change*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell.
- Honig, M. (2009). No small thing: School district central office bureaucracies and the implementation of new small autonomous schools initiative. *American Educational Research Association, 46*(2), 387-422. doi:10.3102/0002831208329904

- Horn, I., Kane, B., & Wilson J. (2015). Making sense of student performance data: Data use logics and mathematics teachers' learning opportunities. *American Education Research Association*, 52, 208-242. doi:10.3102/0002831215573773
- Johnson, R., & Christensen, L. (2014). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage
- Kanter, R. M., Stein, B. A., & Jick, T. D. (1992). *The challenge of organizational change*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2012). *The leadership challenge*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley Brand.
- Leithwood K., Louis, S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). Review of research: How leadership influences student learning. *Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement*, 1-90. Retrieved from <http://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/2035/CAREI%20ReviewofResearch%20How%20Leadership%20Influences.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2, 34-46.
- McDonnell, L. M. (2005). No Child Left Behind and the federal role in education: Evolution or revolution? *Peabody Journal of Education*, 80, 19-38.
- Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). (2006). Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494270.pdf>
- Myers, M. (2000). Qualitative research and the generalizability question: Standing firm with Proteus. *The Qualitative Report*, 4(3-4). Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR4-3/myers.html>
- New York State Education Department (NYSED), Office of Accountability, 2014. Albany: New York State. Retrieved from <http://www.nysed.gov/news/2015/statewide-high-school-graduation-rate-shows-continuing-gains>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Porter, A. C., & Polikoff, M. S. (2007, October). NCLB: State interpretations, early effects, and suggestions for reauthorization. *Social Policy Report*, 21, 4. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED521703>
- Printy, S., & Williams, S. (2015). Principals' decisions: Implementing response to intervention. *Education Policy*, 29,179-205. doi:10.1177/0895904814556757

- Reis, S., & Boeve, H. (2009). How academically gifted elementary, urban students respond to challenge in an enriched, differentiated reading program. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 33, 203-240. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ871028.pdf>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.
- Sharratt, L., & Fullan, M. (2009). *Realization: The change imperative for deepening district-wide reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Shirley, M. (2013). Lewin's theory of planned change as a strategic resource. *Jona*, 43, 69-72. doi:10.1097/NNA.0b013e31827f20a9
- Sullivan, L. (2009). Social and behavioral sciences change theory. In L. Sullivan (Ed.), *The SAGE glossary of the social behavioral sciences* (p.70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi: 10.4135/9781412972024.n340
- Thomas, J., & Brady, K. (2005). The elementary and secondary education act at 40: Equity accountability, and the evolving federal role in public education. *American Education Research Association* 29, 51-67. doi:10.3102/0091732X029001051
- Toprak, M., & Summak, M. (2014). Involvement to change and commitment to change: a study at public schools. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Education*, 4, 953-968.
- Van Der Ark, T. (2014). Making math work: K-8 blended learning. *Dream Box Learning*, Retrieved from <http://www.dreambox.com/white-papers/making-math-work-k-8-blended-learning>
- Waters, J. T., & Marzano, R. (2006). *School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement. A working paper*. Denver, CO: McREL. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494270.pdf>
- Whitney, S., Maras, M., & Schisler, L. (2012). Resilient schools: connections between districts and schools. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 7, 35-50. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1459219690?accountid=27700>
- Wilder, T., Jacobsen, R., & Rothstein, R. (2008). *Grading education: Getting accountability right*. Washington, DC: EPI & Teachers College Press.
- Wong-Mingji, D. (2013). Encyclopedia of management theory: Force field analysis and model of planned change. In E. Kessler (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of management theory* (pp. 288-292). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. doi 10.4135/9781452276090.n88

Appendix A

Official Letter of Introduction

Dear Participants,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College (SJFC) in Rochester, New York. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a study to focus on the common characteristics of superintendent leaders who create conditions that promote student growth. For this study I am interested in hearing your characteristics, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate a commitment to student growth.

In this study, you will be asked to participate in one on one interviews that will last approximately one hour. Your responses will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. The researcher will facilitate the discussion and take field notes during the session. Confidentiality will be maintained as participants will be identified using a number, and all notes and transcriptions will be locked in the researchers home and destroyed after three years.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without negative consequences. If you wish to withdraw at any time during the study you may simply stop participating.

Please feel free to contact me, Terry Ward at _____, if you would like to discuss anything about this study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed and approved this research proposal. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun _____. She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.

Thank you for your willingness to help with this research! Your ideas are valuable and will help determine the critical components of school superintendent leadership.

Terry

Terry Ward
Doctoral Student and Researcher
St. John Fisher College
Doctorate in Executive Leadership

Appendix B

IRB- Approved Consent Form

St. John Fisher College

- Title of Study:** School Superintendent Leadership: A Grounded Theory Study of Factors Which Lead to Student Growth
- Name of researcher:** Terry Ward (315) 374-4672, Ed.D Candidate, SJFC
- Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Theresa Pulos, Ed.D (tpulos@sjfc.edu)
- Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this study is to identify superintendent leaders' characteristics, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate a commitment to student growth. This study focuses on the common characteristics of superintendent leaders who create conditions that promote student growth.
- Place of study:** The interviews will be with superintendent leaders in the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services (OCM BOCES), as well as the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison (OHM) BOCES.
- Length of participation:** The process may include multiple interviews with the same superintendents. The interviews will begin in February, 2016 and conclude sometime in April, 2016. The interviews are scheduled to be one hour in length. The interviews will include the use of open ended questions; responses will be recorded and transcribed.
- Risks and benefits:** All participant responses will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. The researcher will facilitate the discussion and take field notes during the session. Confidentiality will be maintained as participants will be identified using a number, and all notes and transcriptions will be locked in the researchers home and destroyed after three years.
- Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:** Data obtained from interviews will find participants identified in numeric form. All data, including the code-book, will be locked at the researcher's home and destroyed after 3 years. Results of the study that are incorporated into publication will not utilize any identifying information.

Your rights:

As a research participant you have the right to:

- Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate
- Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty
- Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty

- Be informed of appropriate procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you
- Be informed of the results of the study. If you agree to participate, you must check “yes” on the consent form; a check mark next to “no” will end further communication.

If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the researcher, Terry Ward at (315) 374-4672 for appropriate referrals.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun (585) 385-8012. She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.

-
- Check here to indicate that you have read and understood the study described above and have access to a copy of this form
 - Check here to indicate that you agree to participate in the study as outlined above

Participant Signature

Appendix C

One-on-One Interview Format

Prior to the interview, the researcher will say to participants:

“The purpose of this study is to identify superintendent leaders’ characteristics, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate a commitment to student growth. This study focuses on the common characteristics of superintendent leaders who create conditions that promote student growth. I will be recording this interview. If you are uncomfortable with recording this interview, please let me know and the interview will not be recorded. This is a volunteer process and you do not have to answer any question you do not want to. All volunteers are anonymous and your name will never appear in any documentation linking you to this study. I am going to ask you questions now, again if you do not want to answer any question just let me know. Also, if at any time you would like to stop the interview simply let me know.”

Below is a list of questions for semi-structured interviews. During the interview the researcher may ask additional questions for clarification purposes.

Introduction Questions:

1. Can you tell me something you do for fun?

- How often do you get to _____?
- Where do you _____?

Opening Questions:

1. In a study about student growth: “I would like to start by hearing about your perception about student growth. How do you know your students are growing?”

2. What do you think is the most important thing you want me to know about student growth in your school district?

- Can you tell me more about _____?

Main Questions and Probes:

1. Tell me about your programs in the school district.

- How long have you been doing _____?
- Can you tell me about the implementation process?
- Who was involved in the implementation process?

- Why did you chose to involve _____ in the implementation process?
- How is it going now?
- Would you change anything at this point? Why or why not?

2. How do you measure student growth?

- How do you define student growth?
- How do you measure student growth?
- What type of assessments do you use to measure growth?
- What type of professional development around measuring student growth has your staff participated in?
- Does the staff have input on the professional development? If so, how are they included? Specifically who is involved?

3. How do you implement change?

- Who is involved?
- How long is implementation?
- Can you give me a specific example?
- Was the change successful? Why or why not?
- Being reflective, would you change anything about the implementation?
- How do you create a culture ready for change?

4. What are the most difficult parts of your job?

- How do you remain committed to student growth?
- What are the actions you take to remain committed to student growth

Closing Question:

1. Is there anything else you want to tell me about or that you think I should know?