

UNLEARNING AS SCHOOL REFORM: HOW PRINCIPALS  
FACILITATE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN  
NONTRADITIONAL SCHOOLS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to everyone in my family who told me I could do it, encouraged me to do it, and supported me to do it.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
CEO	Chairman and Executive Officer
CSR	Comprehensive School Reform
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
IDEA	Individuals With Disabilities Education Act
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MMFR	Modified Method of Free Recall
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
OD	Organizational Development
PK	Pre-kindergarten
PYD	Positive Youth Development
PBL	Project Based Learning

## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose & Research Design:** The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013) was to explore unlearning in education, focusing on how PK-12 principals experience unlearning while successfully facilitating school improvement. Unlearning has been identified as an important component of organizational development (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Hedberg (1981) defined unlearning as a process through which learners discard knowledge...and make way for new responses and mental maps” (p. 18). Bradley, Golner, and Hanson (2007) acknowledge the process of learning in education fails to consider unlearning.

**Findings:** Unlearning plays an important role in school improvement and school reform being successful. The principals identified unlearning as what needs to happen in order for school improvement/reform to occur. While the principals noted the importance of unlearning, they did not specifically provide professional development opportunities that led teachers and staff to engage in examining beliefs but rather relied upon the philosophical frameworks of the initiatives they chose to promote and evoke unlearning.

**Implications:** Unlearning in education has implications for academia, practioners and policy makers to consider unlearning as an affective approach to school improvement/reform that could improve the quality of schools and increase student achievement.

**Keywords:** unlearning, school reform, school improvement, principal,  
nontraditional school, traditional school, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

## I. INTRODUCTION

Three 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at a predominantly White middle school are sitting in an empty classroom during their conference period talking about school business. A White male teacher comes in grasping a sheet of paper in his hand. He shakes it towards the three teachers and says, “Look at the speech Javonte wrote. It's horrible! He can't even write a complete sentence. How can someone be a class president and not know how to write a complete sentence”? The teacher shakes his head in frustration and disgust, awaiting a response from the others. When he does not receive a response, he continues, “He struggles in math.” One of the three teachers interrupts and asks him, “How are you helping him?” The frustrated teacher responds, “Well, I just give him a 70 so he can pass because I feel sorry for him; he's a well-behaved kid, though. He is poor; his family doesn't have any money, so I just pass him and he's already in my intervention class and I don't know what else to do. But, c'mon ya'll, how can we have a class president who doesn't know how to write a complete sentence? He's not like any of the other presidents we've had at this school.”

In this scenario, the student is a Black male and all previous school presidents have been White students. This incident can be broken down, teased out, and analyzed to illustrate: a) how teacher beliefs influence teaching practice, b) how culturally responsive teaching is lacking in this scenario, and c) how the bystander effect operates. By failing to take advantage of an opportunity to correct this teacher's comments, the teachers in this scenario reinforce the deficit thinking displayed by this teacher toward the student. Unfortunately, interactions like these are all too common in many American public schools and often go unaddressed (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). If deeply rooted

negative beliefs about students and their backgrounds go unchallenged, how can we expect technical school reform efforts to create better school environments and high achieving students? How can a principal successfully facilitate school improvement and try to close the achievement gap in the midst of this kind of deficit mentality which still dominates the thinking of many educators across the United States? How can a principal successfully facilitate school improvement when teachers hold negative beliefs about certain students from certain ethnic backgrounds and with certain abilities and who do very little beyond the technical requirements of schools to help all students achieve? How can principals successfully facilitate school improvement when the behaviors and beliefs held by education professionals toward certain groups of kids play a significant role in how they interact, assist, and educate marginalized kids to become successful in school and in life?

Educational leaders often respond to the need for school improvement by implementing a new program or making structural changes in the organization. While these efforts are well intentioned, they are not likely to be successful unless principals first help teachers address the negative beliefs and practices that get in the way of improvement. Principals can more successfully facilitate change if they consider unlearning. Many researchers identify unlearning as an action that describes how and why some organizations learn and progress and others do not (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Becker, 2010; Casillas, Acedo, & Barbero, 2010; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Hedberg (1981) defined unlearning as “a process through which learners discard knowledge...and make way for new responses and mental maps” (p. 18). By this definition, Hedberg suggests unlearning is a mental and behavioral process that relies on individuals assessing



and changing their beliefs and actions in light of new information. Researchers describe unlearning as situated within the learning process (Baltierrez, 2009), serving as a catalyst to learning. Unlearning is further identified as an important component to organizational development and organizational learning (Becker, 2010). Unlearning is an important factor in the ongoing development of education organizations. Research suggests that our ability to facilitate change is enhanced when we seek to understand not only organizational development, school improvement, adult behavior, and the learning process, but include unlearning as an equally important factor that can nurture progressive improvements in educational organizations (Owens, 2004; Senge, 1990; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

### **Background**

Organizational development, school improvement, and school leadership are all important concepts to understand when we consider the process of unlearning as a type of school reform that could result in more meaningful change than the reform efforts of the past 50 years (Cegarra-Navarro, Eldridge, & Martinez-Martinez, 2010; McGill & Slocum, Jr., 1993; Sherwood, 2000; The Wallace Foundation, 2011). As Lei, Slocum, and Pitts (1999) noted, “Unlearning past management behaviors may hold the key to gaining momentum for change” (p. 24). First, understanding how organizations develop may allow a school leader, who is charged with facilitating school improvement, to have a clearer, broader perspective of all factors that influence schools in order to devise and advance an effective school improvement plan (The Wallace Foundation, 2007). For example, since schools are influenced by interconnected governmental, economic, and cultural factors, a leader should understand the impact these factors have on schools in

order to effectively facilitate school improvement (Alinsky, 1971; Fleury, 1997; Rothstein, 2006). Further, a school leader should understand the historical efforts of reforming schools in order to identify what historical reform elements should be considered, included, or excluded from the school improvement plan (Jennings, 2012). Considering the historical roots of how schools developed as organizations could allow a leader to hone in on what the leader and the school community need to unlearn in order to move forward.

Second, when educators of schools consider reform or improvement, they should understand how their personal beliefs and relationships with others influence their actions (Jacobs, 2003). Understanding one's beliefs will assist educators in identifying what approaches to school reform they should take to improve their schools (Conner, 2010; Cross, 2003; Jennings, 2012; Southerland, Smith, Sowell, & Kittleson, 2007). Since unlearning involves assessing current beliefs and actions and replacing them with new ones, understanding how one's beliefs contribute to the current state of the school is an integral step in the school reform process (Conner, 2010; DeCourcy, 2011).

Last, when considering unlearning as an option to reform schools, the role of the principal is key, and current research has identified principals as the catalysts to change (Center for Educational Leadership, 2013; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013; The Wallace Foundation, 2007). Although research over the years has identified the important role leadership plays in improving schools, technical school reforms efforts have overshadowed the importance of leadership. However, during the last ten years, the school research community has begun to re-emphasize principal leadership (The Wallace Foundation, 2007), acknowledging

that technical school reform efforts alone rarely result in sustained improvement with student achievement.

It is important to understand the historical context of organizational development, personal beliefs, and school leadership and how they are integral factors in the process of facilitating unlearning.

### **Organization Development**

Organization development (OD) was derived in the business field and considers the role of management as important in the change process. Organization development is an approach to building capacity and staying abreast of current changes in the environment (Bolman & Deal, 2008). OD is used synonymously with organization learning in many fields. Organization development consists of several components. First, it is about renewing systems within the organization that allow it to stay ahead of and adapt to structural, humanistic, technological, and economic changes in the environment (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Second, environmental factors spark the necessity for organizations to change, so it is important that leaders view organizations through a systems approach framework (Houchens & Keedy, 2008; Owens, 2004; Senge, 1990). Understanding organizations from a systems perspective acknowledges that the organization itself is not restricted to walls but framed around human behavior (Owens, 2004). Third, OD heavily focuses on people because what people think, value, and how they behave influence organizational development. Next, OD considers how organizations learn through experience, how organizations deal with serious problems, and how organizations systemically plan to respond to serious problems in order to move forward. Last, in organization development an individual and/or a top level administrator

are identified as the agents to initiate, execute, and sustain the OD plan (Owens, 2004).

Owens defines organizational development for school districts as:

...a coherent, systematically-planned, sustained effort at system self-study and improvement, focusing explicitly on change in formal and informal procedures, processes, norms or structures, using behavioral science concepts. The goals of OD include both the quality of life of individuals as well as improving organizational functioning and performance. (2004, p. 235)

Organizations are ecological systems. Schools can be considered ecological organizations that are made up of several interconnected yet interdependent subsystems (Bascia & Rottman, 2011). Even though schools are influenced by internal and external systems of people, government, culture, community, and economics, schools have historically followed and continue to follow the tenets of business to inform their practices (Center for Creative Leadership, 2004) of developing as organizations.

### **Organization Management**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, many school and business organizations adopted Frederick Taylor's scientific style of management as a structural model to increase efficiency, establish uniformity with procedures, and to detail accounting procedures (Owens, 2004). Adopting Taylor's scientific style of management allowed organization leaders to create systems in which hierarchy and formal organizational charts dictated the relationship and job functions of management and workers. While Taylor focused on middle management in the early 1900s, Henri Fayol (Owens, 2004) identified a top-management executive as the essential employee who could achieve results. Fayol's idea of organization management was to produce highly trained, highly skilled leaders who

possessed technical skills such as leading, planning, organizing, and evaluating. Next, Max Weber expanded on Fayol's and Taylor's concepts by introducing bureaucracy as a system for management of large, complex organizations. The theory of bureaucracy included all of the organizational management elements of Taylor and Fayol and emphasized the establishment of a system of procedures and rules for dealing with interpersonal relations and the rights and duties of employees (Owens, 2004). Last, during the same time, Mary Parker Follett identified management not as a hierarchy but as a social position in which the manager addressed conflict by compromise, bringing in all the stakeholders, or by exercising power (Owens, 2004), which was in opposition to Taylor and Fayol who identified management as solely retaining power. Follett's idea of management conflicted with the previous theorists in that Follett believed that power should reside with those at the lower level of the organization (Owens, 2004). Toward the end of the organization management movements noted above, researchers of the Hawthorne Studies (Owens, 2004) set the pathway for human behavior to be considered a factor in organization productivity; the behavioral characteristics of interest that evolved from the Hawthorne Studies are motivation, group dynamics, morale, and personnel relations (Owens, 2004). A finding of the Hawthorne Studies was that human variability is an important component of productivity. All of these behavioral characteristics identified as a result of the studies in the 1920s became known as the theory of human relations movement.

Human relations theory identifies the behavior of individuals as being an important factor in organizational development. School reform efforts have ignored the human behavioral component of school reform (Owens, 2004). Sarason (1995) noted that

school reform efforts have not addressed the inner core assumptions that are difficult to bring about because we cannot agree, as an American society, on how schools need to be reformed (Ravitch, 2010). As a result, school reform efforts fall back on the business, scientific model of improving organizations (Bascia & Rottman, 2011). Considering OD as the model for improving organizations, school reform efforts have reflected those technical OD elements of management as the solution to improving schools. The organization of schools, of course, is heavily influenced by these movements of organization development and management. Schools today are complex systems founded upon bureaucracy and are heavily influenced by external bureaucracies such as the state and federal governments. Further schools are faced with improving their current performance rates on standardized tests, and in efforts to balance the many roles school leaders must perform, many school leaders look to external reform programs to help them close the achievement gap among students.

### **School Leadership**

Organization Development research has historically defined management as one of the most important factors in organizations improving. School leaders have historically focused on managing and improving technical aspects of the job but have been charged with closing the achievement gap between student groups in a standards based era while serving an ever-evolving cultural milieu of students (Goodlad, 1996). Researchers have identified a) setting a shared vision; b) ensuring effective management of the organization; c) acting with integrity and fairness; d) responding to political, social, and cultural contexts; e) collaborating with faculty and community; and f) developing an instructional program conducive to student and staff learning as some of the qualities and

characteristics principals should possess in order to successfully facilitate school improvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Those characteristics identified in school leader research are similar to those found in organization management research. Most recently, school reform research has identified principals as the bridge between school reform mandates and successful school improvement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Owens, 2004; Wallace, 2007).

### **School Improvement/Reform**

School improvement and school reform can have different meanings in different contexts. In some contexts school reform can mean researched based best practices written in a programmatic fashion that schools chose to adopt. In other contexts, both school improvement and school reform can be inclusive of community, instruction, leadership, and student achievement. For this study, the terms are used interchangeably because I believe in order to improve schools, they must be reformed. There are at least three schools of thought as to what school reform should look like.

Public education school reform in the United States has several layers. School reform efforts can be initiated or mandated by state or federal governments (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). First, in 1998 the United States Department of Education created the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program to assist schools in implementing scientifically based research practices designed to increase student achievement (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). Title I, Part F of the CSR program specifically targets high-poverty, low-achieving schools so that reform efforts are more targeted and can produce results at a rapid rate. Second, another school of thought is that parents should have school choice, basing school reform on

market economy principles. The third school of thought for school reform resides in the belief that schools should be improved from within by focusing on teachers and leadership. Because the state and federal government have already attempted to address improving schools through technical school reform and school choice and has not been successful enough to close the achievement gap, this study attempts to understand school reform by looking at how people unlearn behaviors that contribute to stagnant schools, which requires looking at the people within schools.

### **Understanding Learning & Organization Learning**

As one attempts to consider unlearning as a part of the school improvement process one must first understand learning and organization learning. Organization learning, the learning organization, and OD are all terms that describe the learning process of organizations. Learning can be considered “a process of acknowledging our actions, reflecting on those actions, deciding how to change our next action, and apply that decision to another action” (Senge, 2000, p. 93). Learning is what some researchers identify as the catalyst to change (Fulmer & Keys, 1998) in organizations. When individuals within an organization collectively learn and are successful, researchers consider the organizations as learning organizations (Fulmer & Keys, 1998).

Learning organizations are capable of adapting to internal and external changes in the environment (O’Neil, 1995; Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, & Carroll, 2007). These organizations change their actions based on environmental changes because they have the foresight and capacity to do so. Schools have not been viewed as learning organizations because, by and large, they still operate as they did 50 years ago (Houchens & Keedy, 2009; Senge, 1990).



## **Unlearning as a Theory of Action**

In order to unlearn the way we organize and conduct public school in the United States, we must acknowledge that the current way is not closing the achievement gap because: a) U.S. society does not agree on how schools should be improved, and b) neither historical nor current reform efforts address power structures that create inequities (Houchens & Keedy, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Unlearning makes others self-conscious of how their experiences, beliefs, behaviors contribute to their pedagogical practices.

The current structure and culture of schools marginalize certain students, grant privileges to others, and promote meritocracy as a way to achievement regardless of the conditions those who have been marginalized have experienced (Alinsky, 1971). Unlearning moves the focus from those marginalized to those who sustain the marginalization. Stakeholders in education must be willing to confront the social, economic, and political power structures that contribute to the failing structures of schools (Rothstein, 2006). Stakeholders must acknowledge their role and place in contributing to the current system. Unlearning the way we provide traditional education in the United States requires that we ask educators and everyone involved in education to consider/reconsider the way we describe, define, and plan for children's education.

School systems are a direct reflection of the geographical and socioeconomic demographics of our cities—creating and maintaining inequity based on socioeconomic status (Alinsky, 1971; Rothstein, 2006). Teachers are taught to provide interventions, tutorials to address low academic achievement, rather than looking at the structure, curriculum, instruction, beliefs, or policies (Ravitch, 2010) that shape schools. The ways in which schools are designed, structured, and managed reproduce the socioeconomic

status of where individuals live (Alinsky, 1971; McLaren, 2001). Schools validate certain ways of learning, speaking, and behaving (Garcia & Guerra, 2004), which is why meritocracy pervades the speech of educators and policy makers, all of whom are representative of the White middle class (Valencia, 2010). Identifying how experience, beliefs, and practices converge or diverge with one another will help educators get at the root of improving schools (Ravitch, 2010). For example, a teacher should consider how her acquiesce of state and district adopted curriculum and politics contributes to or sustains educational disparities.

### **Teacher Beliefs and Unlearning**

Personal beliefs and values influence the professional practices of people (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Nespor, 2006). Even though teachers may be aware of best practices, personal beliefs have a stronger influence on their behavior (Nespor, 2006). Negative beliefs about culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are interwoven throughout the policies and actions of America (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Researchers have termed these beliefs as deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). These negative beliefs play out in the structures, policies, and instructional practices in school systems (Valencia, 2010, p. 7). Especially important, research has found that teachers often view children and families from low socioeconomic status who have cultural and linguistic differences as deficient compared to the dominant culture (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). School reform efforts have not addressed these types of beliefs, which is why understanding the role of unlearning in education is critical to improving schools and increasing student achievement.

Beliefs can be defined as deeply held personal truths that one holds about society (Nespor, 2006). Beliefs are shaped by personal experiences (Fives & Buehl, 2008;

Knoblauch & Hoy, 2007; Lee, 2010; Milner, 2005), and those personal experiences become knowledge and inform the practices of educators—specifically teachers (Causey, Thomas & Armento, 2000; Gay, 2009; Ward & Ward, 2003). Beliefs include how knowledge is constructed, justified, stored, and spread in what Fives and Buehl (2008) call “personal epistemology” (p. 136). Prior knowledge and beliefs are familiar to people; people cling to what they know, and teachers are no different. It is difficult for people to accept another way of knowing and doing that negates their own beliefs about others (Causey, et al, 2000; Streets, 2011). Even though a person may have the knowledge to know and do better, beliefs tend to have a stronger impact on behavior than knowledge alone (Ward & Ward, 2003).

Teacher beliefs in the United States have been generally crafted around a culture—a Western White male middle class culture—that is historically known for marginalizing people of diversity (Brock, Moore, & Parks, 2007; Causey, et al, 2000; Lee, 2010). Teachers who live by this cultural belief about marginalized groups generally view them as liabilities and stereotypes rather than as assets in the classroom (Milner, 2005). On the flip side of beliefs, researchers indicate that some teachers falsely believe that all students should be treated equally and that as long as students work hard, they can achieve at great rates—resulting in what some researchers term as colorblindness (Causey, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Milner, 2005). Each of these sets of beliefs, colorblindness and deficit thinking, ignore the historical and current political, economic, and social factors that adversely affect the education of marginalized groups (Bass & Gerstl-Pepin, 2011). Many White middle class teachers use their experiences and prior knowledge as filters through which they work to educate children (Baskerville, 2009).

These filters through which teachers look generally work for the middle class White student. As Ladson-Billings (2014) stated “a literature that tells us what works for middle class advantaged students typically fails to reveal the social and cultural advantages that make their success possible”(p. 76). Gay (2009) posed this question, “Why do teachers use examples from their own personal experiences as worthy teaching and learning resources but deny the same prerogatives to ethnically and culturally diverse students?” (p. 147).

For a teaching force in the United States that is primarily White middle class females, beliefs can become problematic in the school setting when educating a rapidly increase diverse student body (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Causey, et al, 2000; Knoblauch & Hoy, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Milner, 2005; Ward & Ward, 2003). To address what Milner (2005) calls the cultural mismatch, researchers propose addressing issues of diversity and cultural competence through teacher preparation programs (Lee, 2010; Siwatu, 2007; Streets, 2011) and calls for teachers to approach multicultural education through personal reflection on their beliefs that inform instructional practices; even further, researchers propose that multicultural curriculum addresses both the technical and affective (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Gay, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2011 ) aspects of school reform.

Effective approaches to school reform are what some researchers state are missing (Barry & Lechner, 1995; The Wallace Foundation, 2008). Unfortunately, historically educators have believed that teaching is a mastering of technical components that are applicable to all groups and in all contexts (Gay & Kirkland, 2003); we tend to accept technical reforms to what is perceived to be, yet inaccurate, a technical profession (Gay

& Kirkland, 2003). Addressing affective aspects of school reform can get to the root issue of achievement gaps and disparities in education. Researchers strongly suggest that teacher beliefs that adversely affect student learning should be addressed by confronting the negative beliefs and engaging in personal reflection (Gay, 2009; Milner, 2005) to address the detrimental beliefs. Further, researchers assert that multicultural education via culturally responsive pedagogy is the necessary affective response for school reform (Barry & Lechner, 1995). Barry & Lechner (1995) cite Hernandez's definition of multicultural education as a:

perspective that recognizes (a) the political, social, and economic realities of individuals' experience in culturally diverse and complex human encounters; and (b) the importance of culture, race, sexuality and gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status and exceptionalities in the education process. (p. 149)

Researchers further acknowledge that embracing multicultural education may cause White middle class educators to feel inadequate to deal with the cognitive and affective aspects associated with culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2009). Additionally, teachers may view multicultural education as a civil rights issue, not an education issue (Barry & Lechner, 1995). When teachers view multicultural education as a civil rights issue, the responsibility to address the inequity is removed from the educators, often to social service agencies and politicians. Teaching culturally responsively requires teachers to learn from students rather than about the students (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.76). In order for teachers to learn from students, they must acknowledge where they are in their own beliefs and value system in order to understand themselves. White middle class teachers'

beliefs about themselves and others often come into conflict with students of different cultures and backgrounds (Milner, 2005).

Much of the research on teacher beliefs focuses on two main aspects: teacher self-efficacy (Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008; Siwatsu, 2007) and teacher beliefs as they inform instructional, curricular, and relational actions in preservice teachers (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008). The research on teacher self-efficacy attempts to inform us of what contexts and measures are in place or need to be in place that help teachers feel (or not feel) confident in working in certain educational environments (Brock et al, 2007). The research on teacher beliefs informs us about how teacher beliefs affect education as a whole. Research tells us that personal and professional experiences influence teacher beliefs and behaviors in the classroom (Nespor, 2006).

The changes that are required of educators and those involved in education are the ones that affect the underlying assumptions and beliefs of educators and classroom practices (Gay, 2010). Because personal beliefs go largely unaddressed in school reform efforts and teacher preparation programs, (Causey et al, 2000) very little changes to improve the environments and academic achievement of marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2007). In order to address this issue, educators and everyone involved in education must acknowledge, reflect, and be challenged on their beliefs and relational, instructional, and curricular relationships with students and families of color (Brock, Moore & Parks, 2007; Gay, 2010; Streets, 2011).

### **Addressing Cognitive Change**

In order for teachers to better affect student achievement, researchers indicate that deep self-reflection must occur. Because changing beliefs is difficult, Causey et al (2000)

make four suggestions for cognitive change: (1) accretion in which additional information and experiences are gained and coexist with existing knowledge, (2) tuning in which evolutionary changes in one's cognitive structure occurs, (3) weak restructuring in which a person enriches existing theories with new information—forming a relationship between the two, and (4) radical restructuring in which learning dramatically changes one's memory structure after serious reflection. Changing beliefs involve changing the mind. Unlearning in education calls for how we view, do, and construct the culture and operations of schools to be culturally responsive to diverse groups.

Organizational behavior is the study of how people behave in the context of an organization (Owens, 2004, p.76). Understanding organizational behavior can bridge the gap between theory and every day practice. Organizations are formal structures operated by people. People bring with them their experiences, beliefs, and behaviors that affect the operations and culture of the organization. It is for this reason that behaviorists believe changes in the way people think and behave will have a great impact on the performance of the organization (Owens, 2004, p. 97). It is for this reason school leaders should understand, and consider addressing, human behavior when attempting to facilitate change through the process of unlearning.

### **Prompting Individual Unlearning**

Before people think or behave differently, something has to create dissonance with the current ways they think or behave so they see the need to assess and modify their existing mental models and actions (Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001); without assessing existing ways of knowing and doing, individuals neither learn nor unlearn and end up remaining the same (Kramer, 2012). Although two distinct processes (Srithika &

Sanghamitra, 2009), unlearning is a part of learning. Unlearning is the moment at which a person's existing knowledge set and actions are challenged by or come into conflict with the introduction of new ideas (Berger-Knorr, 1997; Cruz, 2007; Tyler, 2011). These new ideas cause the person to reflect on the existing way of knowing and doing. If the person decides the new information is a better, more effective way of knowing and doing and replaces the existing ways of doing with the new information, unlearning occurs and paves the way for learning to occur (DeCourcy, 2011). In this way, unlearning is a precursor to learning, a sort of reflective suspension of traditional, existing ways of knowing and doing. Unlearning allows an individual to move forward with the new way of knowing and doing.

This study attempts to understand the processes individuals experience when facilitating school improvement. More specifically, this study attempts to understand if and how PK-12 principals understand the role of unlearning when facilitating the school improvement process.

### **Prompting Organizational Unlearning**

When Hedberg (1981) wrote about how organizations learn, he identified unlearning as an important factor in the way organizations learn. He defined unlearning as “a process through which learners discard knowledge...and make way for new responses and mental maps” (p. 18) and asserted that unlearning is “just as important as adding new knowledge” (p. 3). Organizations that unlearn are organizations that progress (O’Neil, 1995); however, many times, the converse occurs (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). In organizational unlearning literature, researchers note the effects that unlearning has on organizations (Akgun, Lynn & Byrne, 2006; Akgun, Byrne, Lynn & Keskin, 2007;

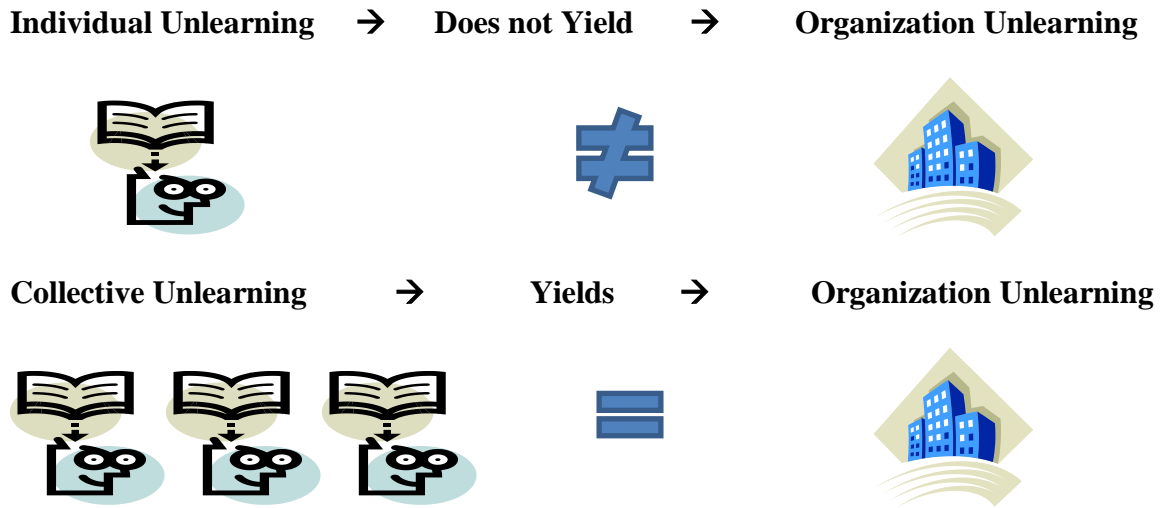


Becker, 2010; Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; de Holan, Phillips & Lawrence, 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). This body of research suggests organization unlearning is an essential component to improving organizations by “reorienting organizational values, norms and/or behaviors, by changing cognitive structures, mental models, dominant logics, and core assumptions that guide behavior” (Sinkula, 2002, p. 255). Since individual unlearning may directly impact organizational unlearning, it is necessary for leaders to pay attention to the role of unlearning during the change process (Senge, 2000). When individuals of an organization make the mental shift to operate differently, organization unlearning can occur. Because unlearning has implications for human behavior and actions, it reaffirms the notion that human capital, whether in a leadership or supportive role, is a significant, if not the most important, factor in organizational change (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Wheatley, 2002).

In order for organizational unlearning to occur, several individuals within the organization must collectively unlearn (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Organizations that fail to unlearn are organizations that remain stagnant. This is often the case for schools—hence so many reform efforts over the last 50 years. When a number of individuals within the system choose to remain the same, no improvement occurs and the organization remains static (Akgun, Byrne, Lynn, & Keskin, 2007). Studying organizational unlearning through educational leadership can provide unique insight into how to successfully facilitate school improvement and the role of unlearning in education reform.

## Visual Representation of Individual and Collective Unlearning

### *Individual and Collective Unlearning*



*Figure 1.* Visual Representation of Individual and Collective Unlearning. This figure represents the concepts as described in organizational unlearning literature (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Microsoft Clipart & Symbols

### **Why Educators Should Care About Unlearning**

The attempt to reform schools by measuring student success and school performance on standardized tests has yielded a 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning generation that defines educational success based upon passing scores on standardized tests (Good & McCaslin, 2008). Studying the invisible variable of the learning process, unlearning, in the field of education could provide the missing humanistic approach to sustainable school reform that would build on technical aspects of school reform designed to improve student achievement. Thinking back to the first school reform efforts, educators have facilitated technical reforms that opened doors to equity and have produced some gains by reducing achievement gaps between minority and White students (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Now, those who write, and

pass into law, school reform measures should look at the process of how schools learn and consider unlearning as an integral step in the organizational learning process. Identifying the elements and relevance of unlearning could prove to be beneficial to principals who facilitate change.

Understanding the process of facilitating change is important. Educational leaders tend to focus on what to do and how to do it, but do not necessarily acknowledge, consider, or demonstrate awareness of the mental tug-o-war that teachers may experience when deciding whether or not to buy into a new school improvement initiative. It is difficult for leaders to directly point out how intangible qualities such as teacher beliefs and values influence the quality of education students receive; but, it is easier to identify tangible qualities that influence education, which is why school reform is mainly technical in nature. Addressing tangible issues in schools seems easier, but rarely does everyone involved in education see the real effects of dropout rates and lack of student motivation (Owens, 2004) as they occur. For this reason, the field of education should consider unlearning as an area of study because effectively reforming schools requires a major shift from traditional methods of school reform (Goodlad, 1994).

Educators should care about the impact of unlearning because neither their efforts to improve their own instructional methods nor the accountability system can improve student achievement. Educators should understand how their lived experiences manifest themselves in instructional, cultural, and structural educational practices (Caza & Caza, 2008). Understanding oneself can make way for relationships of empathy to develop, rather than sympathy for or apathy toward marginalized students. Understanding oneself can open the door to alternate ways of knowing (Manski, 2010). Unlearning can provide

the opportunity for educators to supplement technical school reform efforts with humanistic ones. Unlearning can provide a space for organizational change through individual learning and unlearning. As Smith (2005) notes:

Whether reform begins district-wide or school-by-school, change is difficult. It isn't easy to alter the status quo, even if it does serve the best interests of children. People get comfortable and become used to doing things a certain way...successful reform requires a willingness to take risks and do what is not familiar. It also takes a deep commitment and willingness to persevere. (Help for your community: Obstacles to reform, para. 1)

To tell an individual what he has known to be true all of his life about teaching and learning by introducing new information is not easy and can cause individuals to become defensive. Generally, people neither like to hear nor face the fact that they have been wrong.

If we ignore unlearning in education, school reform will continue to be technical and marginally effective. Consequently, schools will continue to operate in traditional ways. Last, policy makers will continue to ignore and throw money at the political, social, and economic factors that impact educational achievement of the very students the reform efforts purport to help.

### **Principal's Role**

Principals have to be equipped with the skills to facilitate change, and that involves changing individuals' mental models (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2009). Principals' conceptualization of issues in education and their ability to address those issues determines how the principals approach the

problem (Owens, 2004). If a principal is a proponent of a standards based education, the principal will most likely support reform efforts that reinforce statewide curriculum standards and testing. If a principal is a proponent of market principles when it comes to schools, the principal will most likely promote school choice. If a principal is a proponent of growing teachers and leadership by looking at how experiences, beliefs, and values translate in the classroom, the principal is likely to promote culturally responsive pedagogy. Principals themselves have to believe that reframing mental models as to how educators view and serve students (Glickman, 2009; Nelson & Guerra, 2014) is a more effective way to increase student achievement than the technical strategies alone that are outlined in current and historical school reform efforts.

### **Why Principals?**

The importance of school leadership has been included in school reform research over the last 50 years; however, for the past 7-10 years since technical school reform efforts alone have not closed the achievement gap among students, there has been a deliberate effort to refocus and emphasize school leadership as a contributing factor in successful schools. Leadership is the action of pulling people to work together to achieve organizational goals. Principals have to work with and through others to achieve their vision and school goals.

Such a demanding job, with its never-ending time pressures, requires a principal who not only understands organizational behavior and its importance to school leadership but who has also internalized a personal commitment to constantly keep leadership and human concerns high on the list of priorities. (Owens, 2004, p. 79)

Principal leadership most recently has been identified as a catalyst to school improvement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; The Wallace Foundation, 2007). Research from The Wallace Foundation seeks to study and understand how effective leadership contributes to improved student achievement.

Current school reform research tells us that principal leadership is the catalyst to increasing student achievement and that a principal is the bridge between school reform mandates and those mandates working successfully (Turnbull et al., 2013). However, this latest reform focuses on technical skills and characteristics, such as being able to interpret data and attending professional development workshops and training that principals must possess and be able to execute. The Wallace Foundation asserts that principals need to possess “values” and “vision” (Public Agenda, 2007) that will help them facilitate change in schools. The Foundation also acknowledges that these skills alone cannot solely result in substantial school improvement (The Wallace Foundation, 2007).

The Wallace Foundation’s school reform research effort is reflective of the historical attempts at school reform that focus on technical aspects of schooling in order to improve student achievement; however, a notable difference between the school reform research conducted by The Wallace Foundation and other research is that The Wallace Foundation research emphasizes leadership as the bridge to implementing the policies that school reform research identifies as a necessity in order to increase student achievement. I agree that principal leadership is a catalyst to successfully facilitating the change that historical school reform policies have mandated; however, the research ignores how a principal successfully facilitates school improvement, how successful

school improvement unfolds, and what factors need to be present in order to facilitate sustainable change.

To further support the notion of unlearning in education, Rudy Crew, a superintendent who spoke at a Wallace Foundation engagement, stated that significant gains in school improvement would come only if principals “are required to live out on the edge and risk the failure that sometimes accompanies bold experiments” (Public Agenda, 2007, p. 9). Leaders who take risks to improve student achievement, should understand the role of unlearning during the change process as risk taking is not always encouraged or welcomed in education (McWilliam, 2008; Public Agenda, 2007).

At the same speaking engagement, a principal, Mel Riddile, described the state of educational systems. He stated that principals who want to increase student achievement must not “be afraid to do something different...We’re creating systems that do the opposite of what we want them to do...Micromanagement kills innovation...The system is designed to make people march in a straight line” (Public Agenda, 2007, p. 9). Riddile highlights the consequences of reform measures that focus on conformity that maintain current traditional structures of schooling. In an era of failed accountability, education now calls for principals and teachers who are willing to step out of the norm to ensure all students achieve (hooks, 1994; Meier, 2011; Public Agenda, 2007). Due to the comfort of achieving results in a technical manner, not possessing the capacity to operate outside of the box, or because the structure of our society creates a challenging school system from which to work within, principals generally become managers rather than innovators of schools (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The Wallace Foundation proposes that we at the

state, district, and university levels unlearn the old ways of preparing school leaders and become innovative in the way we view a principal's role in school improvement.

I propose we look at an important part of organizational learning called unlearning in order to understand if and how principals understand the role of unlearning when facilitating school improvement. The next step in school reform research is to understand how the facilitation of successful school improvement takes place, which is why unlearning in education is worth studying. Whereas studying principal leadership to understand the most effective qualities and traits a school principal must possess, this experiential qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study attempts to understand the moment of tension at which PK-12 principals reflect on their current beliefs and practices, introduce new ways of thinking and behaving to staff, and make decisions to unlearn old ways of operating that results in successful change. When a school principal possesses the skills identified by researchers, how do researchers and practitioners understand the use of the skills when principals facilitate school improvement? This study attempts to understand the "how" of successfully facilitating school improvement through the phenomenon of unlearning.

For these reasons, principals of schools were chosen to participate in this study in order to understand the role unlearning may have played in an education setting.

### **Problem Statement**

School reform efforts continue to rely on technical responses to improve humanistic systems (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Historically, these technical reform efforts have not resulted in substantial school improvement as hoped (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2002; Cuban, 2008; Goodlad, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Takona, 2012).



National school reform efforts in the United States have been written to correct the faults of public education for all students who have been adversely affected (homeless youth; Native American; students in high poverty, low performing schools; students of color; students who need reading assistance; those in the juvenile justice system, and those who have disabilities by the school systems (ESEA, 1965). Many of these historical reform efforts have served commendable purposes by opening the door to provide equal opportunities for all students to have access to a quality education as in the purposes of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Unfortunately, externally imposed school reform efforts have historically focused on changing only technical aspects of schooling such as funding and mandating school-based interventions, charging schools with the development of parental involvement groups, or mandating the offer of professional development to teachers and principals (United States Department of Education, 2011).

Most recently, school reform efforts have attempted to correct the problem of the growing achievement gap between low socioeconomic Black and Hispanic students and their White counterparts through standards based accountability measures. However, it is an understanding among many educators, education researchers, and American citizens that, in general, school reform efforts have fallen short of improving schools (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). These reform efforts have been technical in nature and do not address the political, economic, and social policies that impact students' education nor have these reform efforts addressed the structural, cultural, and deeply held beliefs and practices that are dangerously rooted in traditional (Freire, 2000) public education in the United States. Technical responses to humanistic systems rarely result in substantive changes

(Sergiovanni, 2000). Tackling economic, political, social, and personal beliefs and behaviors can prove to be a daunting, messy endeavor; however, schools may not improve until those who work within the school, as well as policy makers, understand how their own thoughts, beliefs, and actions contribute to the inequities in schools (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Rothstein, 2006). Later in the study I discuss the various waves of school reform efforts in America in order to build a case for what I think is a missing link in school reform efforts.

The current wave of school reform research tells us that principal leadership is an important catalyst to school improvement (Houchens & Keedy, 2009; Senge, Cambron McCabe, Lucas, Smith, & Dutton, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2007). Researchers believe that focusing on school leadership is the next logical step to increasing student achievement on standardized tests, thereby improving schools (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). It is important to note that I do not define school reform as solely increasing test scores, but rather school reform as a comprehensive approach to improving the culture and climate of schools through its stakeholders; improving academic performance of students through multiple opportunities and measures; and providing quality culturally responsive professional development for teachers, principals, and all other stakeholders. Previous standards based national reform efforts have put measures in place that mandate improved quality of teaching through certification requirements and professional development and increased student performance on standardized tests (NCLB, 2001), but there is little research conducted on how successful school leaders attain these measures (Cuban, 2008). Research conducted by The Wallace Foundation identifies principal leadership as a missing research area of focus in school

reform. The Foundation concludes principal leadership is the missing link between school reform policy and implementation. Identifying principal leadership as the missing link has implications as it removes responsibility from policy makers and other stakeholders to school leaders solely. Focusing on principal leadership has further implications on how we view the role (Council on Chief State School Officers, 2008), support (Wallace, 2011), and appraisal of principals (Willen, n.d.). Principal leadership research conducted by The Wallace Foundation (2007) identified skills and qualities that leaders must possess in order to successfully improve schools. The Wallace Foundation (2007) identified effective school leaders as transformative visionary instructional leaders who are able to build relationships at the campus, district, and political levels. What The Wallace Foundation research excludes is the how school improvement occurs when an effective leader is in place.

### **Context of the Study**

Framing principal development as a school reform effort is important because there are implications for principal professional development, district hiring practices, principal appraisal, and requires a shift of perspective on the principal's role in a school. Based on my professional experience of identifying principal leadership as one of the most influential factors in changing the mindset of staff members and individuals on campus, I selected PK-12 principals who have experienced unlearning as the unit of analysis for this study.

This study analyzes the experiences of five public school PK-12<sup>th</sup> grade principals who have successfully facilitated change that resulted in school improvement. The change, identified by the principal, could have been academic, behavioral, instructional,

social, and professional, community focused, or individually based. Success and school improvement were defined as resulting in a positive change in student academic achievement based on student grade reports; improved campus climate, culture, and student and staff behaviors; positive change in instructional practice; positive change in staff beliefs; increase in overall school test scores or a target student group; increased parental satisfaction, and non-traditional curricular or programmatic changes.

For this study, organizational learning is described as organizations that are able to successfully adapt to environmental changes and constantly reinvent themselves. Organizational unlearning is described as when individuals in an organization collectively unlearn behaviors that prevent them from progressing and replaces those behaviors with more effective ones. Unlearning is described as the point of learning at which existing knowledge comes into conflict with new information; the individual then reflects on the information and replaces the existing knowledge and ways of operating with the new information and ways of operating. School reform is defined as an attempt by external or internal forces to correct the faults of public education for students who have been adversely affected by educational policies. The research questions are:

1. How do PK-12 principals understand the role of unlearning in school improvement?
2. How does principals' awareness of unlearning influence their facilitation of the school improvement process?

Since unlearning can potentially affect the growth of an organization, exploring the role unlearning plays in school improvement is beneficial to school leaders as they seek to increase student achievement (Conner, 2010). Further, identifying the appropriate

theoretical framework and methodology to understand the nebulous concept of unlearning is critical to the foundation of the study. Understanding and interpreting principals' lived experiences with successfully facilitating school improvement can best be understood from an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis theoretical framework and methodology.

### **Significance of Study**

Studying organizational unlearning in an educational PK-12 setting through a phenomenological framework provides unique insight into the process of unlearning in education through principal leadership. This study may reveal the importance of unlearning in the organizational change process. Second, this study will contribute to the body of research about unlearning in the education setting. Third, this study may reveal how principals initiate and successfully facilitate organizational change. This study may further identify conditions in which unlearning takes place in an educational setting.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a phenomenological qualitative approach that examines how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2013). Introduced by psychologist Jonathan Smith in 1996, IPA is a philosophical framework and methodology for capturing the lived experiences of individuals (Smith, et al., 2013). IPA is concerned with "what happens when the everyday flow of lived experiences take on particular significance to people" (p.1). In this study, the lived experience is represented by public school principals who have successfully facilitated school improvement. The researcher attempts to understand if and how unlearning plays a role when principals facilitate school improvement. IPA

combines the major contributions of the theories and methods of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, and Schleiermacher (Dowling, 2007; Smith, et al., 2013).

IPA includes phenomenology as a part of its theoretical underpinnings because individuals' lived experiences are studied and analyzed. IPA takes up hermeneutics because those lived experiences are interpreted by the participant and the researcher. Finally, IPA is idiographic in nature because the researcher considers the individual parts of lived experiences in great detail that make up the whole.

### **Phenomenology—Part One of IPA**

The philosophical concept of phenomenology provides ideas as to how to examine and understand lived experiences (Smith et al., 2013, p. 11). Phenomenology allows researchers to understand unique individual experiences that share a common phenomenon. There are four main philosophers whose research has influenced IPA.

**Understanding the individual.** First, during the mid-1800s to early 1900s, Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, took a positivist approach to phenomenology. Husserl believed before a researcher can engage in phenomenological work, one must understand the role of bracketing (Smith, et al., 2013). Bracketing is a characteristic of phenomenological research (Bazeley, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). In order for researchers to understand their own perceptions of the world, they must put aside their assumptions and perspectives of day to day operations that influence their perceptions. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger all recognized that bracketing must be utilized so that the phenomenon itself can be identified as it originally appears during the participant's recount of the lived experience rather than through the lens of the researcher's perspectives and assumptions. For example, Smith et al. (2013) stated that

Husserl noted that events are clouded through our assumptions and preconceptions of the world, and those assumptions need to be bracketed in order to understand the full epoch of the experience. Husserl calls these assumptions and preconceptions the life world, which is the taken for granted everyday life we live (Smith et al., 2013, p.15). If we consciously reflect on the events that occur through metacognition, it can be said we are out of the lifeworld. If researchers understand their assumptions and preconceptions of the world, they are better able to understand what participants share because they have isolated, suspended their perspectives of the world.

Husserl believed experience should be examined in its raw, natural form (Dowling, 2007; Smith et al., 2013) and that phenomenological inquiry should be focused on what is experienced in the individual's consciousness (Smith et al., 2013). Husserl regarded experience as the fundamental source of knowledge, and the aim of phenomenology is the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience (Dowling, 2007). Husserl called consciousness of experience intentionality. Additionally, Husserl coined the concept of phenomenological reduction in which the researcher who studies the phenomenon must compartmentalize all theories, concepts, and prior understandings that would prevent seeing the phenomenon in the form as it is presented. Heidegger was an interpretivist who agreed with Husserl's explanations of phenomenology except Heidegger believed understanding a phenomenon is important, not just describing it (Smith et al., 2013). During the late 1800s and into the 1900s, Heidegger coined the term hermeneutic phenomenology which emphasized that the lived experiences of participants must be interpreted by utilizing reciprocal hermeneutics in which the researcher and

participants see understanding as a reciprocal activity. Heidegger believed researchers should employ hermeneutics as a methodology in order to gain an understanding of a phenomenon that exceeds description (Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, 2007; Smith et al., 2013). In other words, Heidegger believed researcher bracketing sets the stage for raw researcher and participant interpretation of experiences to occur and that understanding is a mutual process between researcher and participant.

Husserl spoke of intentionality—the internal experience of being conscious of something (Dowling, 2007, p.132). Husserl believed that every mental act is related to some object and implied that all perceptions have meaning. In other words, the researcher must engage in bracketing in order to see the experience as it was lived without theoretical analysis or prior assumptions screening the lived experience. A limitation to Husserl's description of phenomenology is that it focuses on description rather than understanding; however, IPA takes up Husserl's idea of phenomenological reduction (bracketing) and pulls his emphasis on reflection as being an integral part of the theoretical construct of IPA and takes up Heidegger's addition to phenomenological research—hermeneutics—in order to understand lived experiences through interpretation (Smith et al., 2013).

Merleau-Ponty was a post positivist (Dowling, 2007, p. 134) who built his phenomenological understanding from Husserl and Heidegger's philosophical concepts of phenomenology. Like, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty believed the goal of phenomenology was to rediscover the first experience (Smith et al., 2013). Merleau-Ponty believed that individuals should view their experiences in a new light without relying on categories of reflective experience or pre-reflective experience in a process named “phenomenology of



origins” (Dowling, 2007, p. 134). IPA takes from Merleau-Ponty returning to the original experience and phenomenological reduction like Husserl. Not only do phenomenological researchers need to consider description and understand individual lived experiences, they must also understand the context of which the experience occurred in order to gain a full understanding of the experience. This is exactly what Sartre contributed to phenomenological research—an understanding that context influences participants’ understanding of their experiences. Sartre believed that individuals are in the process of becoming—that they are not finished. Understanding an individual requires understanding the context of the situation, the history of which the event takes place, and the social climate in which the individual acts (Smith et al., 2013).

**Understanding the researcher’s role.** Similar to Husserl, Heidegger emphasized the importance of “being in the world” (Smith et al., 2013) to describe how humans exist, are involved in, and act in the world. IPA takes up hermeneutics in order to extend Husserl’s description of phenomenology in order to gain a richer understanding of individual lived experiences. Sartre’s contribution to IPA is situated in describing and analyzing the context in which the phenomenon occurred as well as the understanding that both what is and what is not present define who we are. Similar to the hermeneutic understanding of IPA, Sartre believed that what we are able to see and what we are unable to see contribute to researcher understanding of the individual (Smith et al., 2013).

### **Hermeneutics—Part Two of IPA**

The second philosophical theory that informs IPA is hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutics considers the methods and purpose of the interpretation, if it is possible for the researcher to recover the intentional meanings of the author, the

context of the historical event, and the context of the present day interpretation (Smith et al., 2013). A concept that is intertwined throughout the theory is the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2013). The idea of the hermeneutic circle is in order for one to understand the part, one must look to the whole, and in order for one to understand the whole, one must look to the parts. The purpose of engaging in the hermeneutic circle is to account for the complexity involved in the analysis of interpretation. As we saw in the previous section on phenomenology, the theory evolved from Husserl's description of lived experiences to Heidegger's realization that understanding the lived experiences is critical to Sartre's emphasis on understanding the lived experiences through context. Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Heidegger are three phenomenologists that Smith et al. (2013) identified as influencing the hermeneutic component of IPA.

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was one of the first philosophers to write about hermeneutics as system (Smith et al., 2013). Schleiermacher believed that hermeneutics should consider both the language a person uses and, like Sartre, the context of that person's life experiences, thereby, combining the technical and the humanistic aspects of interpretation. Sartre emphasizes the importance of understanding context so as to understand beyond a superficial level. If a researcher or psychologist is able to consider both the technical and humanistic and is skilled at analysis through a systemic approach to analysis of experience, then that researcher or psychologist could possibly understand the participant better than the participant understands herself. Considering a combination of the technical and humanistic is an attribute of hermeneutics that IPA borrows to explain the depth and rigor necessary to analyze an individual's lived experience that goes beyond the superficial. Systematic analyses, connections from a

larger data set, and an active understanding of psychological theory are all factors that inform interpretation (Smith et al., 2013). On the other hand, language plays an important role in interpretation, and often context influences language. More recently, Hans-Georg Gadamer expanded on the space linguistics occupies in hermeneutics stating that one's preconceptions, prejudices, or horizon of meaning that are part of one's linguistic experience that make understanding possible. Gadamer followed the work of Heidegger and took a constructivist approach to phenomenology. His two main contributions to phenomenology are prejudgment and universality. The second contribution, is universality, in which the person who expresses himself and the person who understands are connected by a common human consciousness (Smith et al., 2013). Prejudgment and universality are what make understanding possible in the research process. Unlike other phenomenologists, Gadamer added an additional step at the end of the phenomenological research process in which he incorporated dialogue between the researcher and participant that allows for feedback to be provided and for discussion to occur regarding the accuracy of interpretation. In other parts of qualitative research, this process can be considered as member checking (Bazeley, 2013). Gadamer believed interpretation is related to one's being in the world (Dowling, 2007) and is forever evolving (Larrison, 2009). IPA takes from Gadamer the hermeneutic elements of checking for accuracy of interpretation and acknowledging and understanding the role linguistics plays in interpretation.

Last, IPA takes from Heidegger the fact that phenomenology is an interpretative philosophy in itself. As a participant interprets the meaning of the phenomenon, she gives meaning to that lived experience; the researcher must interpret the phenomenon as it both

appears and does not appear. IPA takes up hermeneutics and the influence of fore-structure—realizing the importance of researcher bracketing. While the researcher comes with her own experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions, it is critical to the research process that the researcher brackets these experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions in order to identify and understand the phenomenon as it manifests itself in the participant's recount of the experience.

### **Idiography—Part Three of IPA**

IPA takes up Idiography due to the particular individual nature of phenomenology. Idiography permits the IPA researcher to engage in a small number of individual cases in particular contexts. Another characteristic of considering the part to the whole is the analysis process of IPA that focuses on the detailed to the general, therefore, making Idiography a perfect match for IPA. IPA outlines a thorough and systematic approach for analyzing single cases in detail and moves toward generalities across the many connected cases (Smith et al., 2013). Idiography is representative of single cases in order to show an existence of the phenomenon. Smith et al. (2013) note that idiographic research is more suited for IPA than nomothetic research. For nomothetic research, data are collected, transferred, and analyzed in a way that prevents retrieval or analysis of the data from individual participants (p. 30). Being able to return to the particular source of information is important during the analysis phase of IPA especially when engaging in the hermeneutic circle and Gadamer's final step in the phenomenological process—feedback. Chapter 2 of this study will include more information on IPA and how the study is situated within its framework.

## **Study Organization**

Chapter 2 includes a literature review of organizational unlearning in the fields of business, psychology, and education. The literature review in Chapter 2 seeks to explore how unlearning in the business and psychology fields are relevant to unlearning in education. More specifically, the literature review seeks to understand how principals understand and experience unlearning while facilitating school improvement. Chapter 2 includes a short reiteration of the description and analysis of phenomenology as the philosophical framework and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodology and specific theoretical framework. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2013) was chosen because the framework allows for a phenomenon to surface through lived experiences of individuals—in this case, public school PK-12 principals who have successfully facilitated school improvement as the lived experience and unlearning as the phenomenon. IPA allows the researcher to interpret the experience as told by the participant.

Chapter 3 includes a detailed description and explanation of the IPA methodology that will be used to conduct the study. Chapter 4 provides the reader with the results and findings of the data collected during the study. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the participants' and researcher's interpretation of the data and implications for future research and the field of education.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **History and Socio-Cultural Context**

Unlearning has been studied in various fields such as business, psychology, and human resource management (Akgun, Lynn et al., 2006). Each field has coined its own terms to operationalize a concept that has shared meaning along a spectrum of interpretations. For example, organization memory (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; de Holan et al., 2004), organizational forgetting (de Holan & Phillips, 2004; de Holan, Phillips & Lawrence, 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009), organization unlearning (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Klein, 2008; Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008), and counter conditioning (Cooper, 1998) are a few terms that suggest similar concepts and processes of how individuals and organizations unlearn. Hedberg (1981) discussed the concept of organization unlearning in his seminal piece entitled *How Organizations Learn and Unlearn*, and since then, there have been more attempts in the business field to differentiate between the concepts of organizational learning and unlearning.

The study of organization development is heavily concentrated in the business sector. I found very little research regarding unlearning in education; therefore, the majority of literature on organizational unlearning included in the study is from the business sector and includes research on unlearning from the fields of psychology and education. Further, most of the empirical and theoretical unlearning business studies were conducted outside of the United States. The unlearning articles used in the review of literature are mainly theoretical in the business sector, empirical in the field of psychology, and both theoretical and empirical in education.

Much of the early research on unlearning considered the concept to be subsumable under learning. That is, unlearning has rarely been distinguished as a process exclusive of learning. As the research on unlearning has developed, there has been a purposeful attempt to distinguish unlearning from learning. Srithika and Sanghamitra (2009) make a deliberate attempt to show that learning and unlearning are, indeed, two different processes that require different actions. They note that unlearning is a precursor to learning—that is, when something is not being learned for the first time because one cannot unlearn something one has never learned. Further, learning is defined as developing new understanding and behaviors while unlearning is discarding existing understanding and behaviors (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009, p. 68). In other words, learning can happen without unlearning but unlearning cannot happen without learning. Both learning and unlearning involve shifts in the mindsets of individuals, which make it only natural for researchers in the field of psychology attempt to understand the concept.

In the field of psychology, unlearning is studied as a psychological process. Psychological researchers who want to know what role the brain plays in unlearning focus on how the brain operates when presented with unlearning opportunities (Cooper, 1998; Kris, 2013). Other researchers in the field of psychology study learned behaviors in order to understand if, when, and how unlearning occurs (Bouton, 2002). The psychology field, just as in the business field, identifies conditions in which unlearning occurs. For example, much of the empirical research on unlearning in psychology focuses on unlearning in certain contexts—when learning has been procedural, Pavlovian, or habit-forming (Crossley, Ashby, & Maddox, 2013). Some research suggests that the process of unlearning can be initiated by and successfully attained with behavioral interventions

while other research suggests unlearning can be successful with the aid of pharmaceuticals (Crossley et al., 2013). Researchers in the field of psychology study unlearning to determine if the learning is completely erased from one's memory or if the learning remains dormant while new learning takes place, which is somewhat different from how the fields of education and business define unlearning. The research included in this review from the field of psychology focuses on the mental and behavioral processes of unlearning from a psychological/behavioral standpoint while business and education study unlearning from the angles of changing mental models, environments, and actions. All fields consider the context in which unlearning occurs.

### **Organizational Development Research**

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argyris and Schön discussed the implications of the individual's impact on learning in their book *Organization Learning I* and later went on to discuss how the individual impacted organizational learning in a second book entitled *Organization Learning II*. Among other important contributions to OD, Argyris and Schon specifically highlighted theories of practice as “special cases” of theories of action that are rooted in problems arising in a professional's specific work context (Houchens & Keedy, 2008). The authors noted that “Theories of practice describe routines, procedures and specific practices for dealing with problems common to the practice environment” (p. 52). The theory of practice for this study is unlearning in education.

Bolman and Deal (2008) discussed reframing organizations by viewing the same problem from different lenses. Bolman and Deal identify the Structural Frame as viewing organizations from a structural standpoint—how they are erected and organized. Second, they identify the Human Resources Frame as understanding what happens when people



and organizations intersect. Next, the Political Frame considers issues of power, resources, and conflicting viewpoints and the effects on organizations. Last, Bolman and Deal (2008) discuss the Symbolic Frame which identifies symbolic elements such as rituals and traditions and how they influence organization performance. Bolman and Deal suggested that OD should consider issues within an organization from these four perspectives in order to survive and thrive (2008). School reform to improve student achievement must consider all four frames because schools are humanistic systems guided by bureaucracy and politics heavily based on tradition of the dominant class in America.

Next, Owens (2004) contributed to organization development literature by focusing on management, behavior, and structure. Owens (2004) differentiates between the formal organization—the structure, and the informal organization—the people, who work within the organization. Further, he emphasized the importance of the two main concepts of social systems—open and closed. Given the way people in schools have historically behaved, they could be considered part of a closed system—an organization that tries “to limit the influence of the community and tend to proceed as though (they are) unrelated to the larger real world in which they exist” (Owens, 2004, p. 121). Schools today continue to operate in a traditional fashion, ignoring the cultural, technological, and demographic changes in our society. In order to stay abreast with world changes, Senge (1990) asserted that adopting systems thinking will allow schools to become learning organizations. Leaders in education should look at the theory and process of unlearning and apply it to how to facilitate school improvement measures.

## **Organizational Learning and Learning Organizations**

McGill & Slocum, Jr. (1993) note that learning organizations discover what is effective by reframing their own experiences, learning from that process, and are self-aware and introspective. These organizations scan their environments and change to meet their goals rather than adapt to the current structure. Lei et al. (1999) identified characteristics of learning organizations. They noted these organizations are a) decentralized and flexible; b) have integrated communication systems that are designed to share and transfer knowledge; c) are comprised of teams that expand their boundaries to combine different functional capabilities; d) have reward systems that are linked to risk-taking behaviors; and e) employ managers that encourage individual learning and growth, networking, and transfers among divisions (p. 31). Many of these characteristics are reflected in research on learning, which is why many researchers acknowledge unlearning as a component to learning. For this reason, unlearning and learning are difficult to conceptualize and research. However, Srithika and Sanghamitra (2009) assert that the two processes are different because learning is acquiring new information while unlearning is discarding information. Additionally, the authors note that the process between the two concepts is cyclical.

Organizations operate in the manner in which they do because of the people who make up the organization—how they think and act. Senge (2000) noted, “If there aren’t fundamental shifts in how people think and interact, as well as in how they explore new ideas, then all the reorganizing, fads, and strategies in the world won’t add up to much” (p. 20). Essentially what Senge asserted is if people’s thoughts and behaviors are not addressed, very little will change. In order to address the ways people think and act,

Senge (1990) identified five disciplines of the learning organization: personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking. Senge (2012) noted that through practicing the five disciplines of the learning organization, people can change the way they act and think together (p. 5). Last, Senge (1990) noted that, “the results from learning organization efforts include noticeable improvements, but, more important, they include breakthroughs of the mind and heart” (p. 5), which is what unlearning entails—breakthroughs of the mind and heart.

Further, learning organizations tend to learn from experience and use that experience to inform their next steps in the organizational development process (Nayyar, 2008). Senge (1990) suggests that organizations that learn include those that have the capacity to change their employees’ minds when introduced to new ways of knowing that could discount or discredit what they have always known to be true. Discrediting one’s own ideas suggests a level of comfort with being vulnerable. Being vulnerable creates an opportunity for unlearning to occur (Johnson, 2007). Individuals’ life experiences, beliefs, and values influence the ways they work; therefore, it is important for organizations to understand the role of individuals and their experiences in the organization.

The more empirical research that is conducted on organizational unlearning, the more clearly conceptualized the term could become, setting the stage to inform how, if, and when unlearning occurs in different settings—including the field of education.

## **Organizational Unlearning**

### **Defining Organizational Unlearning**

Much of organization development and change literature focuses on organizational learning (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kerfoot, 1999; Senge, 1990).

Organizational learning can be broadly defined as the acquisition of new knowledge that can produce positive or negative outcomes depending upon the context (Morgan, 1998).

It was not until after Hedberg (1981) wrote a chapter on how organizations learn and unlearn that organization development researchers began to consider unlearning in organizations, and even then, research was scant and mainly theoretical (Akgun, Lynn et al., 2006; Akgun, Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; de Holan et al., 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). The cyclical and fluid relationship between learning and unlearning makes it difficult for researchers to study the concept. Hedberg's article emphasized the importance of both learning and unlearning, identifying "slow unlearning is a crucial weakness of many organizations" (p. 3).

Tsang and Zahra (2008) conducted a review of the literature written between 1981 and 2007 and found 34 definitions of unlearning defined, described, and explained by management researchers. In an attempt to more clearly conceptualize unlearning to elicit more research on the concept, they found that most definitions of unlearning acknowledged it as a process of discarding, losing, getting rid of, replacing, removing, and altering ways and practices of knowing to make way for positive organizational change. Tsang and Zahra (2008) attempted to collect and analyze definitions to arrive at a

common understanding of what organizations define as unlearning; much of this research for their study was collected from organizations external to the United States.

## A Survey of Accepted Definitions of Organizational Unlearning

**Table 1** Definitions of organizational unlearning

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Definitions</i>	<i>Discarding something?</i>	<i>Value judgment on the discarded?</i>	<i>Replacing by something else?</i>
Akgün et al. (2006)	'changes in beliefs and routines' (p. 75)	No	No	No
Akgün et al. (2002)	'The process of reducing or eliminating pre-existing knowledge or habits' (p. 60)	Yes	No	No
Alas (2007)	'people were expected to abandon their old ways of doing things' (p. 28)	Yes	No	No
Argote (1999)	'forgetting the old and developing a better, more appropriate routine as a way of adapting to changed circumstances' (p. 92)	Yes	No	Yes
Argyris & Schön (1996)	'acquiring information that leads to subtracting something (an obsolete strategy, for example) from an organization's existing store of knowledge' (p. 3–4)	Yes	No	Yes
Baker & Sinkula (1999)	'proactively question long-held routines, assumptions, and beliefs' (p. 413)	No	No	No
Brunsson (1998)	'the discarding of knowledge, or organizational oblivion' (p. 422)	Yes	No	No
Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst (2006)	'the dynamic process that identifies and removes ineffective and obsolete knowledge and routines' (p. 51)	Yes	Yes	No
Dodgson (1993)	'forgetting past behaviour which is redundant or unsuccessful' (p. 385)	Yes	Yes	No
Gustavsson (1999)	'a fundamental change in understanding and perception, where previous knowledge structures are obliterated . . . . On an organizational level, unlearning is concerned with the dominant logic as reflected in strategies, visions and management's actions'	Yes	No	No
Hamel (1991)	'altering perceptual maps . . . (and) driving out old behavior with new behavior' (p. 97)	Yes	No	Yes
Harvey & Buckley (2002)	'a systematic removal of information that is outdated or no longer useful to management decision-making' (p. 375)	Yes	Yes	No
Hedberg (1981)	'discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge' (p. 3)	Yes	Yes	No
	'a process through which learners discard knowledge' (p. 18)	Yes	No	No

**Table 1** continued

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Definitions</i>	<i>Discarding something?</i>	<i>Value judgment on the discarded?</i>	<i>Replacing by something else?</i>
Hendry (1996)	'existing cognitive structures, comprising dominant beliefs and values, especially those of top managers, are challenged' (p. 624)	No	No	No
Klein (1989)	'the elimination of an old response by substituting a new one' (p. 291)	Yes	No	Yes
Lyles (2001)	'the process of reframing past success programs in order to fit them with changing environmental and situational conditions' (p. 691)	No	Yes	No
Martin de Holan & Phillips (2003)	'(in order) to make room for new knowledge, discarding knowledge that had once been functional for the organization but was now seen as a hindrance' (p. 403)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Martin de Holan & Phillips (2004)	'discarding old routines and understandings that are no longer useful and which are blocking much-needed learning' (p. 1605)	Yes	Yes	No
Martin de Holan et al. (2004)	'disorganizing knowledge by breaking routines, changing structures and managing cultures in ways that dismantle deeply embedded knowledge' (p. 49)	Yes	No	No
Meisel & Fearon (1996)	'to leave the comfort of work-tested ideas of the way things are supposed to be done' (p. 205)	No	No	No
Mezias et al. (2001)	'organizational unlearning requires changing the set of cognitions underlying the behavior of the organization' (p. 79)	No	No	No
Navarro & Moya (2005)	'the dynamic process that identifies and removes ineffective and obsolete knowledge and routines which block the collective appropriation of new knowledge and opportunities' (p. 162)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nonaka & Johansson (1985)	'Unlearning is the process through which organizational members discard obsolete knowledge' (p. 289)	Yes	Yes	No

*Figure 2.* A Survey of Accepted Definitions of Organizational Unlearning. Commonly accepted definitions of organizational unlearning and their sources by Tsang & Zahra (2008).

**Table 1** continued

Authors	Definitions	Discarding something?	Value judgment on the discarded?	Replacing by something else?
Nystrom & Starbuck (1984)	'discovering (old ideas') inadequacies and then discarding them' (p.53)	Yes	Yes	No
Prahalad & Bettis (1986)	'the process by which firms eliminate old logics and behaviors and make room for new ones' (p. 498)	Yes	No	Yes
Pratt & Barnett (1997)	'a process of discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge that is stimulated by opposing emotions which enable new responses and mental maps to develop' (p. 82)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sheaffer and Mano-Negrin (2003)	'drawing systematically on past lessons in the derivation of new corporate strategies and practices with the aim of discarding "right-proven" perspectives' (p. 581)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sherwood (2000)	'to accept that learning, knowledge and experience can and should be challenged' (p. 35)	No	No	No
Sinkula (2002)	Discarding 'the present way of doing something and substituting it with a new way' (p. 256)	Yes	No	Yes
Sitkin et al. (1999)	'to discard outdated understandings and routines' (p. 773)	Yes	Yes	No
Starbuck (1996)	'a process that shows people they should no longer rely on their current beliefs and methods' (p. 727)	No	No	No
Weber & Berthoin Antal (2001)	'the process of discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge' (p. 351)	Yes	Yes	No
Wong (2005)	'existing cognitive structures comprising beliefs and values, especially those of top managers, are challenged' (p. 343)	No	No	No

*Figure 2. Cont'd.*

From the review of literature, Tsang & Zahra (2008) found that definitions of organizational unlearning are fluid because unlearning is dependent upon the context in which it occurs and under what conditions. These complex variables make it difficult for the business industry to subscribe to one definition. Many of the unlearning definitions are from researchers of different fields (Becker, 2010; Casillas et al., 2009; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Kennedy, 2004; Shiu & Chan, 2006). Due to the wide range of fields and similar descriptions and definitions of unlearning, one could conclude that the concept of unlearning can be easily transferred to understanding organizational unlearning in education.

Almost all of the definitions Tsang and Zahra (2008) cited include removing or changing knowledge. This is important as people are the holders of knowledge, and people are the individuals who make up the organization, which suggests that organizational unlearning begins at the individual and collective levels. Because researchers have created definitions of unlearning based on their areas of study and the type of research conducted, each unlearning definition may have a subtle variation, so the

type of problem being studied and the field of study informs whose definition researchers choose to cite. For example, some researchers make a clear distinction between unlearning and forgetting (de Holan & Phillips, 2004) while others use the terms interchangeably (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). The term unlearning implies an intentional, conscious act while forgetting suggests unintentional or accidental acts. de Holan and Phillips (2004) define organizational forgetting as the loss of organizational knowledge, voluntary or not, which makes sense as organizations can forget historical and procedural information when an employee leaves the organization. Maintaining current beliefs, routines, and ways of doing (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009) can allow organizations to remain static (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006).

### **Organizational Unlearning as a Precursor to Organizational Learning**

The literature notes that unlearning does not necessarily constitute the need for something to replace it—unlearning can occur on its own (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Once individuals or groups decide to abandon, discard or unlearn values, beliefs, and ways of doing, organizational learning can occur (McGill & Slocum, Jr., 1993). These authors indicated that when there is no forethought given to the process of unlearning, only superficial organizational learning may occur. Many authors purport that the strength in organizational unlearning is that it precedes or works simultaneously with organizational learning (Becker, 2010; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Mieres, Sanchez, & Vijande, 2012). In many cases, unlearning is the catalyst for organizational change, thereby, implicating unlearning and learning as sub processes of organizational change (Akgun Byrne et al.,

2007; de Holan & Phillips, 2004). Mieres, Sanchez, & Vijande (2012) note there can be no innovation without unlearning occurring.

### **Characteristics of Unlearning**

Unlearning alone does not constitute organizational change (Casillas et al., 2010). It is only when unlearning is accompanied by new learning and actions and/or behaviors that organizational change may occur (Hedberg, 1981). Then, the individuals in the organization learn as a whole (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). The authors note that rarely does organizational unlearning occur when only a few individuals in the organization engage in the unlearning process. Organizations that pride themselves in open communication, independence of employees, and interdependences among employees find the unlearning process easier to undertake (Lei et al., 1999). Establishing a climate of autonomy, teamwork, and open communication allows for an open organization in which employees feel comfortable to take risks.

It is important to look at unlearning at the individual level, since organizations are made up of individuals, and if individuals within the organization do not collectively change, the organization will not change (Tsang, 2008). Individuals may change when they are presented with new information that comes into conflict with their existing ways of knowing. Reflecting on individual beliefs can create discomfort because one may not be able to be honest with the self or others. Exposure to new knowledge that causes reflection on deeply held beliefs can elicit defensiveness, cause confusion, and disrupt one's world if one finds out that the way one has always known is no longer true (Senge, 1990). Reflecting on one's beliefs invites a space of discomfort and the opportunity to have one's beliefs that have provided a sense of familiarity and comfort to be questioned,



challenged, and individuals can refuse to accept alternate ways of knowing (Center for Creative Living, 2004).

### **Factors That Influence Unlearning**

Empirical research on unlearning has been limited in the business field but continues to increase. The literature acknowledges the difference in individual, group, and organizational unlearning—specifying there are differences in the three types (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009). Internal forces are more likely to influence individual unlearning whereas external forces are more likely to influence organizational unlearning. Individual unlearning affects organizational unlearning; however, external influences tend to influence organizational unlearning at a faster pace (Tsang, 2008). Srithika & Sanghamitra (2009) further note that “Unlike individual unlearning that is driven by individual motives and needs, group unlearning is driven by the motives and needs of various people, while organizational unlearning is driven by institutional objectives” (p. 70).

Individual unlearning is generally sparked by individual motives and needs to learn to do something differently. An empirical study conducted by Klein (2008) is an example of individual unlearning driven by group and organizational unlearning. The study was conducted in a U.S. school and focused on teacher unlearning through professional development and examined how teachers had to unlearn traditional ways of teaching, learning, and operating that are characteristic of US schools. Klein’s empirical research is informative to the field of education and unlearning; her research shows how the process of unlearning can be studied in an educational context. Klein’s (2008) study included three staff members in a small unique nontraditional school setting. Further, the

article described the characteristics and conditions under which the participants in her study learned rather than unlearned further demonstrating the cyclical nature of the unlearning/learning process. Individuals constitute the human capacity for unlearning. It is not until individuals recognize and actively work to unlearn that the organization itself changes, as individuals (human capital) are what make up the organization (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan & Phillips, 2004). According to Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst (2006), “individual unlearning, management, and teamwork have a significant influence on the learning process” (p.55). While Klein’s research focused on unlearning at the individual level, one can conclude that given the purpose and focus of the school, that group unlearning would need to occur in order for the school’s objectives to be reached. Group unlearning is generally directed by the motives and needs of various people affiliated with the group or organization. Consequently, the founders of the school initiated change that resulted in a non-traditional school. Organizational unlearning is impelled by institutional objectives. The idea of the school itself was a diversion away from how traditional schools operate. In essence, with the creation of the non-traditional, organizational unlearning occurred. With each of the three types of unlearning occurring, several factors influence how the unlearning occurs.

First, unlearning is affected by external and internal factors. Because of the possibility of external and internal factors influencing unlearning, it is difficult to determine causal relationships (Tsang & Zahra, 2008) that may be attributed to unlearning, thereby, making it difficult for one to operationalize and measure organizational unlearning. External factors that affect unlearning can include space, time, leadership style (depending on the rank of the leader), and age of the organization

(Training and Development, 1994). External factors can affect the culture and climate of an organization (Morgan, 1998). For example, the age of an organization can be an indicator of if and how unlearning will occur (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009). The older the organization, the more entrenched are its beliefs, practices, routines, and traditions (Kerfoot, 1999). These are usually the organizations in which one would hear the saying, “This is the way we’ve always done it.” The younger the organization, the greater chance that unlearning can occur because beliefs, routines, and traditions may not already be established (Tsang & Zhara, 2008). Some external factors can result in organizations unlearning very quickly. External factors that force unlearning can propel an organization forward without allowing time for employees to think about changing; shock from the external change makes unlearning happen quickly (Tsang & Zhara, 2008). Srithika and Sanghamitra (2009) refer to the external factors as non-human bins of information that are stored in an organization’s artifacts and systems.

Next, internal factors influence organizational unlearning. For example, internal structural factors can prevent unlearning. Lei et al. (1999) cite “Rigid divisional and functional boundaries, organizational politics, shifts in resource allocation, budgetary changes, and fears that accompany the preservation of turf” as some of the main factors that prevent unlearning (p. 30). However, the most critical internal factor that influences organizational unlearning is an individual’s mindset (Training and Development, 1994). Also known as human bins (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009), the mindset of individuals pose the biggest roadblock to unlearning. As the authors noted, “The sentiment of the individuals in and about the group is a strong antecedent to group unlearning” (p. 70). Individuals have different life and work experiences that frame their mental models about

the work place (Lindsey, Martinez, & Lindsey, 2007). When one speaks of unlearning, one suggests shifting one's belief system and actions. Whether the individual is unlearning or not affects the possibility of unlearning being a success (Johnson, 2007). If an individual is receptive to critically look at one's inner-self and how that plays a role in the stagnation of the organization, there is a better chance that unlearning can occur (Low, 2011). Many of the individuals in the organization must be open and receptive to exploring themselves in order to affect change in the organization because people change, not organizations (Senge, 1990). If only a few individuals are open to change and initiate the process of unlearning, then individual unlearning has occurred but not organizational unlearning because organizational unlearning cannot occur with only a few individuals invested in the unlearning process (Mieres, Sanchez, & Vijande, 2012). Tsang and Zahra (2008) refer to individuals as the performative aspect of unlearning because assessing individuals' mental models and behaviors and shifting them are what initiates and sustains the learning and unlearning processes.

Last, another factor that influences unlearning is context (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Contextual factors that affect unlearning can include space, time, security, leadership style, the age of the organization, willingness to learn, and organization environmental conditions (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Tsang and Zahra (2008) define organizational unlearning as discarding of old routines. This definition suggests that unlearning is an intentional process; and other researchers purport that unlearning can be intentional/unintentional (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; de Holan et al., 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009), continuous/discontinuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999),

cognitive/behavioral (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; Fernandez & Sune, 2009), and beneficial/harmful (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007) depending upon the context.

The context in which the unlearning needs to occur goes hand-in-hand with the size of the organization and how receptive the organization's culture is to change (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009). Smaller organizations tend to engage in the unlearning process quicker, faster, and more effectively than larger organizations. The unlearning must be relevant to the current reality in order for it to be meaningful. McGill & Slocum, Jr. (1993) note that organizations that "...attend only to those experiences that may redirect them toward their goals, and encourage their managers to make only those changes that fit the current structure" (p. 68) are not learning organizations—they do not engage in the unlearning process because they only adjust what they are doing instead of reinventing what they do in order to meet the needs of its customer base. The organizational context heavily influences whether successful unlearning occurs; in this case, the environment must be receptive and conducive to unlearning (Cegarra-Navarro, 2006).

Contextual unlearning in individuals and organizations is influenced by type—intentional or unintentional (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Intentional unlearning suggests planned action, thereby, creating conditions for success. Unintentional learning can cause rifts in the flow of systems, and how the organization responds to them influences the organization's resiliency—as with continuous and discontinuous change. Organizational unlearning encompasses both cognitive and behavioral aspects of individuals and organizations. For example, organizational culture, beliefs, and ways of thinking

influence the process of unlearning just as behaviors of individuals within the organization influences the process of unlearning (Sherwood, 2000).

### **Conditions/Factors that Prevent Unlearning**

First, Srithika & Sanghamitra (2009) cited “lack of individual interest, group friction, barriers in communication, lack of support from top management, reversion/regression-returning to old practices” (p. 75) as contributing to stagnant organizations. When individuals do not effectively communicate and are apathetic about improving the organization and most often when management does not support the change, individuals tend to revert back to old ways. Second, Mieres, Sanchez, and Vijande (2012) list lack of organization-wide commitment to organizational unlearning, conservatism, and deficiencies in learning as factors that prevent unlearning from occurring (p. 403). Next, one of the biggest impediments to unlearning is organizations that only want to adapt to environmental changes (McGill & Slocum, Jr., 1993). Adaptation to the environment can sometimes be equivalent to placing band aids each time the wound occurs instead of addressing the root issue. In order for organizational unlearning to occur, the individuals within the organization must be committed to the change, open to learning, and feel safe to take risks.

Last, businesses that are set in their ways are rarely open to learning (McGill & Slocum, Jr., 1993). These organizations expect employees to make decisions based on company culture. This is the case in education—innovation is sometimes encouraged but is not always successful because the structural system itself tends to reinforce the traditional ways of education (McWilliam, 2008).

### **Conditions/Factors that Facilitate Unlearning**

In order to facilitate unlearning, there must be a culture established in which safety in taking risks is rewarded (Bolman & Deal, 2008). When taking risks is a part of an organization's culture, this suggests that the individuals in the organization are comfortable with failed attempts and revealing their weaknesses (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Not only are individuals in these organizations able to take risks, they also question current practices, which allows them to take the necessary risks to adapt to environmental changes. Srithika and Sanghamitra (2009) note that a "culture of openness, positive reinforcement, rational team members, shared norms and values, top management support, expertise, continuous communication, top management support, environmental stability, sustained motivation" (p.75) are conditions under which unlearning will most likely occur. When these conditions are present, the capacity for organizations to change increases, especially when the environment demands change (Mieres, Sanchez & Vijande, 2012).

### **Suggested Processes for Unlearning**

In order for individuals to unlearn, they must be able to ask two revealing questions about their current level of functioning: "Is this required anymore?" and if not, "How do we get rid of it?" (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009, p. 72). If individuals take a leap to honestly answer these questions, they may be ready to engage in the process of unlearning. Few of the theoretical researchers of unlearning qualify a process for unlearning. Sherwood (2000) is one of the few who does. He notes that individuals in organizations must be able to define a narrow focus of interest, be able to describe he/she knows and share it, challenge the current ways of knowing and doing, and listen to all

ideas (pp. 39-40). Srithika & Sanghamitra (2009) identify processes for individual, group, and organizational unlearning as identifying the problem, changing cognitive patterns, and incorporating new measures of control are necessary for individual learning (p. 70). Further, they differentiate for group and organizational unlearning—knowledge disintegration, knowledge sharing, and elimination of knowledge are necessary for the multiple learner aspect.

Unlearning requires: individuals, groups or organizations to identify existing knowledge; individuals, groups or organizations to recognize the obsolescence of such existing knowledge; individuals to express the obsolescence of knowledge to groups or organizations; groups or organizations to recognize such obsolescence of knowledge; individuals, groups, or organizations to resist or avoid the application of such obsolete knowledge; and substitution of old knowledge by new knowledge (learning gained). (p. 70)

The literature indicates that unlearning is a process connected to learning, and not simply an isolated, insignificant act.

### **What Unlearning Organizations Do**

In an empirical study in which participants completed a questionnaire, Sherwood (2000) recorded, collected, and analyzed data based on individual and organizational perspectives about what makes an unlearning organization. First, Sherwood found that unlearning organizations search for better ways of doing things by exploring beyond the daily operations of the job to stay fresh and in the current context of reality. These organizations recognize that the current rules, policies, process and procedures were made at a time when they were necessary; this acknowledgement indicates that there is a



space for individuals to communicate, explore, make mistakes, and work in connected networks with each other (Sherwood, 2000). Next, he found that individuals in unlearning organizations are open to ideas, “they say ‘yes’ more than they say ‘no’” (Lei et al., 1999, p. 34). Last, the metrics by which employees are measured encourage innovation; these are the employees who know how to manage risk and know when to evaluate and reevaluate ideas.

### **Management’s Role in Unlearning**

Managers and supervisors play a critical role when facilitating change. “Effective managers need multiple tools, the skill to use each, and the wisdom to match frames to situations” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 19). Distributed leadership is “shared responsibility that builds capacity and develops leadership succession in a dynamic and integrated strategy of change” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 97). Distributed leadership is interpreted as sustainable leadership (Dunphy & Stace, 1998) and is necessary for discontinuous change. Lei et al. (1999) assert that senior management “needs to build an internally consistent organization design that closely aligns learning and open communications with strategy, organizational structure, reward systems, and culture to create and share new forms of knowledge throughout the firm” (p. 28). Not only must the head leadership in the organization be able to foster these values and processes in order to nurture unlearning among the staff, the middle managers who will most likely facilitate the process must be supportive as well (Lei et al., 1999).

### **Unlearning in Psychology**

Psychology has been studied for many years—dating before the open of the first psychology research lab in 1879 (Abra & Roberts, 1969). Psychologists who study

unlearning are primarily concerned with the mind and behaviors, treatment, and how and if the brain processes unlearning. Some definitions of unlearning in the field of psychology include “erasing memory or obliteration of the memory traces that encode the behavior” (Crossley et al., 2013, p. 710), discarding old knowledge and ways of doing for new ones (Training and Development, 1994), and unlearning as a type of learning (Low, 2011). Psychological studies in unlearning attempt to understand the role of prior knowledge, how one acquires new knowledge, the effects the new knowledge has on the original knowledge, and the conditions and factors that affect this process (Kris, 2013; Shiu & Chan, 2006). Psychologists do this by studying the brain and stimuli that affect the context and the context in which unlearning occurs. An important variable in studying the unlearning process in psychology is when something is relearned as opposed to being learned for the first time (Bouton, 2002). Unlearning in psychology has been empirically studied in animals and humans. Some psychologists refer to unlearning as cognitive retraining (Kris, 2013); others refer it synonymously with counterconditioning (Dunne & Askew, 2013).

The process of unlearning is an attempt to change an internal process in a given context (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2010). Because the introduction of new knowledge creates conflict/dissonance with existing knowledge (Cooper, 1998), unlearning is an internal cognitive process that individuals undergo to reconcile existing knowledge with new knowledge, which is why scientists who study the mind and behaviors study unlearning.

## **Psychological Unlearning in Certain Contexts**

Psychological unlearning studies tend to focus on specific types of learning (procedural learning, vicarious learning, and extinction) in certain contexts in order to determine if, how, and under what conditions unlearning may or may not occur (Bouton, 2002). For example, many neurobiological studies have been conducted to determine why behaviors learned during procedural learning are difficult to unlearn (Crossley et al., 2013). They note that procedural learning is skill or habit-learning behaviors such as learning to play an instrument, learning to build a house, and learning to ride a bike. These behaviors cannot be mastered through observation and this is what makes them procedural. Crossley et al. (2013) identified three necessary conditions in order for unlearning of procedural learning to occur: a) the behavior must disappear during unlearning training, b) relearning must occur at the same rate as the original learning, and c) knowledge learned in the study must be new.

Second, vicarious learning (Dunne & Askew, 2013) includes learning that is experienced through and from others. For example Dunne & Askew (2013), conducted a study in which they found that when children are learning how to respond to unfamiliar stimuli, they look to familiar adults or parents to see how they respond. Consequently, psychological research has shown that these children mimic the responses of those adults (Shiu & Chan, 2006). Last, unlearning research in regards to extinction finds that memory is not completely erased, it is simply stored until reactivated and is dependent upon learning, not unlearning (Bouton, 2002). Context plays a significant role in unlearning studies conducted in the field of psychology. All of these authors purport that change in context can activate previous ways of knowing, reactions, and responses.

## **How Unlearning is Studied in Psychology**

Researchers in the field acknowledge that “social influences affect the tension between innovation and conservation” (Kris, 2013, p. 342). Empirical researchers in psychology use control and experimental groups and stimuli as standard components of the research process. Many of the unlearning empirical studies follow the common format of the A-B/A-C paired-associate learning paradigm created over 50 years ago (Shiu & Chang, 2006) in that these studies focus on original learning, relearning, and unlearning—looking to see if unlearning really happens in certain contexts such as procedural learning, extinction, and vicarious learning and under what conditions. Abra & Roberts (1969) noted that in 1959, the modified-modified method of free recall (MMFR) test was created to assess learning; since then, more assessment models have been introduced that negate or support the MMFR testing model which assesses the new learning (Abra & Roberts, 1969). For example, the MMFR is supposed to assess if after new stimuli are introduced after the original learning has occurred, and when the original learning is reintroduced after the new stimuli has been learned, does unlearning occur? Studies have shown that if after the original learning is reintroduced and the participant quickly returns to the original stimulus, then unlearning has not occurred—the information was simply internally reserved but never was really replaced by the new learning (Shiu & Chan, 2006). However, if the participant takes a significant amount of time to relearn the original learning, then it is concluded that the participant unlearned the original learning because the new learning took its place (Shiu & Chan, 2006). In other words, unlearning is investigated in psychological studies by looking at the response times between original learning, new learning, and relearning (Shiu & Chan, 2006).

## **Unlearning in Education: A Historical Context of Public Education in the US**

There have not been many empirical studies conducted on unlearning in education; however, there have been reforms in education that have required educators and other stakeholders to unlearn previous ways of knowing and doing in education. For example, the earliest school reform made way for girls to attend schools, initiated desegregation, and opened the doors for students with disabilities to have the right to a Free Appropriate Education as their non-disabled peers. These reform efforts required the mental shift of those who believed education is only for certain people of a certain class and of a certain ability level. As school reform continued to develop in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to adjust to the diversity (Sergiovanni, Starratt, & Cho, 2014) in American schools, educators had to unlearn the ways in which they taught students through curriculum developments and standards based testing (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

If we viewed education through critical pedagogy (hooks, Freire, McLaren), unlearning the traditional ways of schooling and education would have to be facilitated and the responsibility of everyone. Looking at education through the lens of a critical theorist challenges educators and everyone involved in education to openly acknowledge, discuss, rethink, and take action on the civil, racial, and humanistic wrongs in education that are grounded by individuals' beliefs and values maintained through social, economic, and political practices and policies (Fleury, 1997). The very acts of acknowledging, rethinking, and acting upon require the field of education and those who influence education to unlearn the very beliefs and practices that created and sustain the racial, civil, and humanistic injustices that pervade our American public education system. First,

let us look at the historical movements in education that have had significant technical impacts on structure and ways of learning in the United States.

In the late seventeenth century, schools in the 13 colonies were primarily for boys (“Innovators”, 2001). Before the schools were established, children were taught by their parents. However, with the opening of these schools for boys, the responsibility of teaching transferred from the parents to the school. The colonists experienced the process of unlearning with the change of guard for who would teach the children. During the nineteenth century, common schools were developed for everyone, which gave rise to the one room school house (“Innovators”, 2001). With the advent of the common schools, society had to come to terms that more than boys would attend school, and not only would more boys attend school, many others would attend school as well all under one roof of their respective school houses.

Second, during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in an effort to improve the quality of public schools, politician Horace Mann (“Innovators”, 2001) used his position in the government to create the Massachusetts state board of education and served as its first secretary. During his service, he developed six main principles of public education, implemented training for teachers, secured funding for operational items, and increased the length of the school year (“Innovators”, 2001). Mann advocated common education for everyone; however, moral training, standardization, and classroom drill became the emphasis of education due to the influx of poor people in the school system (“Innovators”, 2001). With Mann’s initiatives on education, teachers had to unlearn status quo performance in teaching and to improve their pedagogy through professional

development. Additionally, educators and legislators had to look at the possibility of creating political governing boards in their constituency areas.

Third, in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, John Dewey's philosophy on education was that learning should be child centered, based on psychological and physical development, and based on the world outside (Dewey, 1944)—a stark contrast to Horace Mann's philosophy of public education. Followers of Dewey's philosophy of education had to consider alternate conceptualizations of the purpose of education and unlearn traditional ways of understanding, learning, and teaching as well as the purpose of public education.

In the 1950s Linda Brown Thompson was one of thirteen children who initiated the action for the lawsuit against the Kansas Board of Education ("Innovators", 2001). This action resulted in the U.S. Department of Education's ruling known as Brown vs. Board of Education, which led to the end of legalized segregation in American public schools. Among other things, this action and legislation prompted the unlearning of some Americans in the United States in regards to segregation and access to/exclusion of education opportunities for children.

Next, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the business world began to influence the management of public schools. Ellwood Cubberley is credited with establishing professional administrative teams for schools—following the industrial management ideals of business ("Innovators", 2001). His contribution of forming an administrative team for schools, remains controversial as the focus was on efficiency and solving problems in education with bureaucratic initiatives and not the democratic

education that Dewey spoke of (“Innovators”, 2001). During this time, we began to see full administration forming on campuses.

Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) analyzed the economic effects of World War II on countries, resulting in a welfare state in which governments attempted to solve social problems. Public education, public health initiatives, and public housing were parts of the welfare state (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Citizens in the United States began to oppose the government’s actions relative to war, through social movements. This rebellion and activism bled over into the schools which produced greater educator autonomy and public support. Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) note that later recognizing discrepancies between teaching and student learning, the cries of freedom and innovation in the classroom began to fade along with public trust in the American school system. Unbalanced by accountability and cohesion and distrust from the public, a new wave of education in the 1980s and 1990s ensued (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

### **Recent Reforms that Have Required the Field of Education to Unlearn**

There are many stakeholders who need to be connected to each other in order for educational change to achieve maximum results (Gutmann, 1993). Different values, leadership styles, and politics make organizational change in education complicated (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Communities, students, faculty, staff, and government (stakeholders) all play an influential role in the success of unlearning and creating sustainable education reform.

By the 1980s and 1990s, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Australia, and the United States sought to reform education by unifying it through common standards with



the business model of market economy (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). The market economy was becoming more international and the standardization of schools was the method of choice. This Second Way (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) of education led to a bounty of legislation that led states and local districts to create universal standards of curriculum to help aid with increasing student achievement. Adjusting from a system of innovation and freedom with little oversight to one of bureaucracy, educators found it difficult to implement the abundance of legislation that took away their teaching freedom and required them to deliver prepackaged curriculum (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). This was a major unlearning experience as it completely transformed the delivery of instruction and the role of the teacher. Under the Second Way, families were “given” the opportunity to choose a school to attend due to performance on standardized assessment. As a result, school reform followed the principle of choice as in the market economy, revealing the increasing role government played in education and its marketing and punitive measures for schools that did not meet accountability standards. Professional development for teaching turned into professional development for compliance of government sanctions.

Ending as the First Way did, student learning suffered and educator creativity and motivation waned (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

As we approached the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, neither of the previous two ways of education reform had resulted in significant student achievement or improvement of the field of education. Americans and legislators have not unlearned the fact that policy does not create change, people create change (Senge, 1990). What is amiss is the deeper realization that it does not matter how much legislation is passed and how many reform

opportunities are presented, people are still trying to piece the parts together of the previous reforms (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008) to try to make them work. MacArdle and Mansfield (2007 as cited in Bay & MacFarlane, 2010) warn that educators “may be creating ‘competent technicians who can do the job they have been trained to do but are unable to see beyond the job of work in hand to the wider societal context and purpose of their work’” (p. 755). The novice, unskilled teacher, learns that this is what teaching and learning looks like—legislation, bureaucracy, little academic freedom for creativity for both teachers and students, and little community engagement. Mary Parker Follett and Elton Mayo (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008) recognized that “people’s skills, attitudes, energy, and commitment are vital resources that can make or break an enterprise” (p. 121). We all know that policy does not create change, people do (Senge, 1990).

Looking at school reform efforts over the years, one can conclude that they have required educators and those involved in education to reframe the way they view schooling and education even though most have been technical in nature. These historical reform efforts also required many to unlearn such as in ways sparked by anti-discrimination laws.

### **Unlearning in Education**

The research on unlearning in education includes personal reflections of unlearning racism, colorblindness, and how to teach (Choi, 2008; Conner, 2010; Cross, 2003; DeCourcy, 2011; Hickey, 2012) for both teachers and administrators. Research is particularly scant when looking explicitly for unlearning in education This could be in part because in education, learning is what is supposed to take place; however, the

nuanced, nebulous, but extremely important, concept of unlearning is not even recognized as a component to learning. Bradley, Golner, and Hanson (2007) acknowledge that the process of learning in education fails to consider unlearning. Perhaps this is because in education, there traditionally has not been room for failure, confusion, and uncertainty (McWilliam, 2008), which is what unlearning requires.

McWilliam (2008) asserted that educators must “unlearn habits that have been useful in the past but may not be valuable to the future” (p. 263). As with any familiarity or comfort, one may find it difficult to acknowledge the possibility of something different, something new that would conflict or appear to invalidate what we know (Cooper, 1998). Mc William (2008) suggests that educators must make the shift from traditional knowledge and expertise to teaching accessibility to find information and to prepare students for future job skills. In other words, educators have seen the transitional unlearning of the teacher from “sage-on-the-stage to guide-on-the-side and now to meddler-in-the-middle” (McWilliam, 2008, p. 265). She defines meddler-in-the-middle as a teacher who allows students to ask questions to guide their own learning, is comfortable with risk-taking rather than being a risk minimizer, spends time being creative, and spends more time being an authentic evaluator and collaborative critic. McWilliam (2008) views teachers as facilitating a relationship of collaboration between themselves and the students.

In their empirical research regarding unlearning, Bradley, Golner, and Hanson (2007) identify the process of unlearning they personally undertook to include acknowledging the issue that is causing the conflict, understanding why the issue is a conflict, checking the current issue against personal beliefs and actions, and reframing

one's mental models to address the issue. The authors also acknowledge that what can make unlearning difficult is believing that one is doing right, but the evidence indicates there is more to be done; it then becomes difficult during the process to learn that one's ways of knowing and doing are contributing to the problem. Bradley, Golner, and Hanson (2007) acknowledge that the process of learning in education fails to consider unlearning.

### **Leadership and Unlearning in Education**

School administrators must first understand what their beliefs and values are before they can lead an organization through change (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). It is not until the leader is clear in his/her vision that sustainable leadership can begin to evolve. Because of the lack of research conducted specifically in education about organizational learning and unlearning, education often borrows from the business field for guidance. Education institutions began studying Peter Senge to learn how to improve school leadership. In 1990, Peter Senge said to Fortune Magazine, "Forget your old, tired ideas about leadership. The most successful corporation of the 1990s will be something called a learning organization (p. 17)". Senge (1990) also writes:

In most companies that fail, there is abundant evidence in advance that the firm is in trouble. This evidence goes unheeded, however, even when individual managers are aware of it. The organization as a whole cannot recognize impending threats, understand the implications of those threats, or come up with alternatives. (p. 17)

Just as Senge spoke of businesses in this manner, his message is relevant to schools. Public schools, for the most part, fail certain and many students. There is evidence in school boundary designs, test scores, teacher experience and quality reports,

laws and policies, educational research, and student and teacher feedback that attests that public education is in trouble (Southerland et. al, 2007). Many of those in education (including students and parents) and those who follow education are aware of the problem. Senge (1990) describes this as a learning disability—the way organizations are structured and managed, the way jobs are defined, and the way we have been taught to think and interact are what create this learning disability. Our public schools in America can be considered as having a learning disability.

Senge (1990) refers to reframing one's mental model in regards to systems thinking means seeing relationships in the world as one whole dynamic interconnected system rather than seeing relationships in static isolation. For example, if all stakeholders address the ills of public schools as though all issues are connected rather than seeing problems in isolation (Fleury, 1997), it could increase the potential of successful, effective school reform.

In order to see the world as interconnected, Senge (1990) believes individuals need to learn how to reframe their mental models. Mental models influence the deeply rooted ways we think and act. According to characteristics of unlearning and effective leadership, leaders must unlearn the old ways of knowing and doing and be able to facilitate the unlearning of existing mental models of employees (Training and Development, 1994). School leadership must be able to facilitate the same type of unlearning among its staff.

### **History of School Reform/Improvement**

School reform should focus on improving all aspects of a school: leadership, teachers, curriculum, students, the community and parents, and managing the school

(Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Generally, comprehensive school reform programs include: “a commitment and/or buy-in from the school, specific programmatic elements and structure, professional development/training, community/parental outreach, and evaluation/follow-up” (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). School reform programs can initiate a culture of collaboration to develop and execute the plan, or they can be prescriptive and handed down by an external organization. Additionally, school reform programs can mandate or offer professional development to principals and teachers and require schools/districts to create programs that address parent and community needs as in the case of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. As a result of mandated school reform, some education institutions provide specific curricula to teachers that are developed by their organization (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007).

Public education school reform in the United States has several layers. School reform efforts can be initiated or mandated by the federal or state governments (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). In 1998, the United State Department of Education created the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program to assist schools to implement scientifically based research practices designed to increase student achievement (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). Title I, Part F of the CSR program specifically targets high-poverty, low-achieving schools so that reform efforts are more targeted and that can produce results at a rapid rate.

The CSR and other contract agencies provide databases of school reform models that school districts or individual schools can choose from that are external or in addition to what is mandated by federal or state law in order to address their school or district

needs. School reform has become a booming industry for private firms who stand to gain substantial financial profits (Crouch, 2003) from developing curriculum, designing teams of tutors to supply to schools, and designing and administering assessments. School reform has become a multi-million dollar industry (Crouch, 2003). Many of these private firms provide a technical service to schools—observations, reports, interviews, and suggestions for professional development (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). Even further, there is a catalog of school reform models from which policy makers and school and district administrators can choose from (“Comprehensive School Reform Program”, 2007). Many of these are sponsored by departments within the United States Federal Government. The U.S. Department of Education maintains information in the What Works Clearinghouse on turnaround schools.

### **Historical and Current School Reform Efforts & Results**

School reform efforts in the United States have taken on several forms as noted in the unlearning in education section of this study. I consider historical school reform efforts throughout the United States as ways to unlearn how we, the public and educators, have viewed education. In this sense, we had to reframe our mental models to embrace girls attending schools, not just boys; Blacks and Whites attending the same schools during desegregation, and children with disabilities attending school with their general education peers. Educators had to unlearn that public education was no longer just for White males. This section of education reform resumes by taking the reader through more recent education reform efforts in the United States in order to understand the progression of reform that leads to high stakes testing and principal leadership as a focus of reform.

## **ESEA 1967-NCLB 2002**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was introduced by President Lyndon Baines Johnson as part of his War on Poverty initiative. This Act sought “To strengthen and improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nation's elementary and secondary schools” (“Public Law 89-10”, 1965). The ESEA was an attempt to acknowledge the educational disparity economics can produce; however, ESEA did not address the policies and practices that created the economic disparities.

Since the initial passage of ESEA, there have been several reauthorizations by numerous presidents with the last reauthorization occurring in 2008 with President Barack Obama. The most recent name given to ESEA is the No Child Left Behind Act coined by then President George W. Bush. Over the years, the ESEA has expanded from its original 32 pages (“Public Law 89-10”, 1965) to now well over 600 pages of reform measures (United States Department of Education, 2011). The NCLB Act continues to seek to improve the educational opportunities of American school children (United States Department of Education, 2008). The reform efforts include providing funds to states and school districts, establishing accountability guidelines through high stakes testing, providing opportunities for professional development of teachers and principals, offering parents options for school choice, and establishing guidelines for educating English language learners, to name a few (Smith, 2005).

Next, in order to guarantee equal access to education, in 1980 the U.S. Department of Education was created to promote educational excellence and guarantee equal access to education (“Department of Education”, n. d.). Its current mission is “to



promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (“Department of Education”, n. d.). About one year later in 1981, The National Commission on Excellence in Education was created by Secretary of Education Terrence Bell in order to examine the quality of education in the United States (Smith, 2005). Two years later, the National Commission on Excellence in Education conducted a study *A Nation at Risk* that alerted Americans that “declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted” (*A Nation At Risk*, 1983).

In 1988, instead of requiring students to attend schools in their neighborhood, Minnesota allowed open enrollment in which students could attend any school in the district requiring Minnesotans to reconsider school boundaries and unlearn that school enrollment has be determined by a corresponding address (Smith, 2005).

In 1991, David Kerns, former CEO of Xerox, opened the door to private business supporting public education by organizing the business community to establish the New American Schools, which supported the development and dissemination of research-based school improvement strategies (Smith, 2005). Smith (2005) noted that this marked the beginning of research based practices language being used in education and began to influence the ways in which organizations tied funding to research based practices. This sparked the unlearning of how educational institutions received funding and implemented interventions based on those that have scientifically proven to produce results, setting up education for scientifically based practices which standards based accountability gets its roots (Southerland, et al., 2007).

In 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act that awarded money to states to help them develop standards so that every child could succeed. With this initiative, states began hold teachers accountable by developing standards (Smith, 2005). Teachers had to make the mental shift from teaching what they wanted to teach to teaching within the state standards.

Also in 1994, Under the Improving America's Schools Act, Congress established 15 federally funded comprehensive school assistance centers nationwide to support states, districts and schools with reform aimed at improving the academic performance of all students (“West Ed”, n. d.). Additionally in 1994, The Regional Educational Laboratory Program, established in 1965 with a network of 10 labs, was reauthorized (Public Law 103-227) with the mission of promoting knowledge-based school improvement to help all students meet high standards and to help the nation meet the National Education Goals (Smith, 2005).

Three years later in 1997, in his State of the Union address, President Clinton urged states to take more action and responsibility by challenging them to adopt high national standards and test all fourth graders in reading and all eighth graders in math by 1999 to be sure the standards are met (Smith, 2005).

Five years later in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is signed by President George Bush and called for greater accountability of student performance by requiring states to issue annual report cards on school performance and statewide results. Among other provisions, it also promoted stronger reading programs and pushed for improved teacher quality (Department of Education, n. d.). As a result, school reform followed the principle of choice as in the market economy, revealing the increasing role

government played in education and its marketing and punitive measures for schools that did not meet accountability standards.

Not only did NCLB require teachers to teach differently and administrators to lead differently, it imposed sanctions on schools that failed to meet performance targets to include removal of faculty and closing of schools (Etzion, 2007; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Professional development for teaching turned into professional development for compliance of government sanctions. NCLB sought “to combine the best of state support and market competition” (Hargreaves & Shirley, p. 12, 2009). Because of the perception that public schools were not effective in meeting the needs of all students, federal and state governments elected to give parents options for schooling if their child’s school did not meet federal and state criteria resulting in school choice and charter schools being opened. The first charter school opened about 20 years ago in Minnesota. Charter schools were founded on the principles of being innovative, having less bureaucracy, and returning autonomy to teachers. Unfortunately, the mandates of NCLB, even with school choice have not improved traditional schools as thought.

The extension of ESEA, The No Child Left Behind Act, continues to support market economy principles as solutions to problems legislation has created. The idea of market economy principles in education suggest that if competition among schools increased, the quality of schools and education children receive would improve when in fact, this neoliberalistic approach to school reform touted education and schooling as a commodity rather than improving educational experiences of students (Shiller, 2011). By propelling education in the United States into the market economy, legislators suggest that the schools, students, and families are responsible for the failure of historical school

reform efforts when in fact, they are the ones who created the policy, structures, and systems that perpetuate the same failed school reform initiatives they designed to improve schools.

### **The Achievement Gap Still Exists**

The achievement gap persists between students of color and White students. In 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that on average White students scored higher than Black students on math and reading assessments taken in 2007 by 26 points. At the state level, gaps in math between Black and White students were found in 46 states for fourth grade students and were found in 41 states for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students (NCES, 2009).

NCES (2009) reported that 44 states reported gaps in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores, while 41 out of 42 states reported gaps in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading between Black and White students. The data showed that the increase in the achievement gaps grow greater as students progressed into higher grades. Further, these data demonstrate a relationship between students who qualify for free or reduced lunches have a higher achievement gap than those who do not qualify for free or reduced lunch. In fact, the average scale scores of mathematics test of students in this group only increased by about 20 points between 1997 and 2007 for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in math and reading in both males and females (NCES, 2009). Average math scores for all students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade have increased by about 20 points but less than five points for students who qualify for the national lunch program in both grades and subjects tested from 2003 to 2007.

The average reading scores for all students tested in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading fluctuated between 1-5 point gains and losses between 2003 and 2007, while the gains for

students who qualify for the national lunch program fluctuated between 1 and 2 point gains and losses between the same years. However, the gap in average math scores for Black students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade dropped from 31 points to 26 points between 1997 and 2007; however, the gap for Black students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade was 29 points (NCES, 2009). In Texas, the achievement gap for Black 4<sup>th</sup> graders was 23, 3 points lower than the national average. From 1992-2007, the gains for Black 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in math outpaced the gains of White 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

Status dropouts are no longer attending school (public or private) and do not have a high school level of educational attainment. Based on data from the Current Population Survey, the status dropout rate decreased from 12% in 1990 to 7% in 2012, with most of the decline occurring after 2000 (when it was 11%). However, there was no measurable difference in the rate between 2011 and 2012 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2014).

### **After High School**

Employers estimate that 39% of recent high school graduates are unprepared for the expectations that they face in entry-level jobs (Achieve, 2005). High school graduates agree: the same percentage (39%) of recent high school graduates in the workforce reported they had gaps in their preparation. Employers also claim that almost half (45%) of recent workforce entrants are not adequately prepared to advance beyond entry-level jobs (Achieve, 2005).

College instructors estimate that 42% of college students are not adequately prepared for the demands of college by the education they received in high school; 39% of recent high school graduates enrolled in college says there are gaps in their preparation (Achieve, 2005).

### **Lack of Consideration and of Empirical Research on Unlearning**

Most information on unlearning is theoretical; there is little empirical research that has been conducted on the concept (Mieres, Sanchez, Vijande, 2012, p. 404). The process of unlearning is a nebulous concept that is difficult to conceptualize and study because it involves asking people to reflect on their beliefs, values, and actions when engaging in the change process. Facilitating individual's thoughts and experiences to improve student achievement is not a normal practice in education (McWilliam, 2008). Generally curriculum professional development is the response for teacher learning (Fleury, 1997) to work toward improving student achievement. Further, unlearning empirical research that has been conducted is primarily in the business and psychology fields.

While historical school reform/improvement efforts have not identified unlearning as part of the process, the earlier school reform efforts such as desegregation, equity between boys and girls in schools, and providing opportunities for students with disabilities to have a free, appropriate public education as their non-disabled peers requires a mental reframing of all stakeholders in education from parents to students to teachers to policy makers of how we view who has access to education and under what circumstances (Goodlad, 1994; Goodlad, 1996; Meier, 2011).

Another gap in the unlearning literature is that for unlearning in business, much of the research conducted is on firms outside of the United States, which could suggest cultural differences. Next, for the research that is available, there have been a few attempts to conceptualize unlearning as independent of learning. Much of the review of

literature places organizational unlearning on the organization learning spectrum. There are few empirical studies about education reform and unlearning.

### **III. METHODOLOGY & THEORETICAL FRAME**

Chapter 3 includes an overview of the qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et. al, 2013) study. It also discusses the methods used to conduct the study, the theoretical framework that guided the study, the sampling procedures that were utilized for the study, and the data collection and analysis processes used for the study, as well as a review of the limitations of this study. Through this study, I attempted to understand the processes individuals experience when facilitating school improvement. More specifically, this study attempted to understand if and how public school principals recognize unlearning as part of the school improvement process. The overarching research question is: Does unlearning play a role in school improvement? The specific research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do PK-12 principals understand the role of unlearning in school improvement?
2. How does a principal's awareness of unlearning influence his/her facilitation of the school improvement process?

In order to address the research questions, the following sections contain information about qualitative research in general, the specific methodology, and the theoretical framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2013).

#### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative research study. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research:

Begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44)

Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study because the qualitative research process allows “the researcher to be the key instrument who meets participants in their natural environments” to allow for natural, familiar recall of the experience to occur (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Because the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research (Smith et al., 2013), the researcher is expected to engage in a process of understanding the self before the onset of the study. This process, called bracketing (Bazeley, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2013), challenges the researcher to understand presuppositions that may precede or influence the interpretation or understanding of participants’ lived experiences as described by the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 46). Qualitative research is being utilized for this study because I seek to understand if and how PK-12 principals understand the role of unlearning when successfully facilitating school improvement.

Because qualitative research is complex, throughout the research process, qualitative researchers utilize multiple methods of data collection. Qualitative researchers



utilize an inductive-deductive logic analysis process in order to understand the meaning of participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 45), which supports a fundamental tenet of qualitative research—to look at individuals in detail. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that requires researchers to look at individual experiences in detail and across one another.

Phenomenology is vastly used in the social sciences, as in the case of anthropology and social work, as well as in the medical field. Phenomenological studies generally ask two broad questions to allow participants to relive their experiences (Creswell, 2013). The responses to these two open ended questions inform the researcher of the “what” and “how” of the phenomenon, the textural and structural descriptions respectively (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that focuses on the essence of participants' lived experiences.

The focus of this study is to develop a better understanding of principals' lived experiences of unlearning while facilitating school improvement. For this reason, phenomenology is an appropriate method for this study. Phenomenology is best suited for this study as the approach allows for the common lived experiences of individuals to be interpreted and reduced to a universal essence that is found in all of the individual experiences (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). The purpose of utilizing a phenomenological approach is to study the essence (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2013) of participant lived experiences. Phenomenology requires that the participants be conscious of the phenomenon in order to describe the how and why (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 2013). In turn, the researcher must be able to identify the what and the how during

data analysis so that the researcher can identify, describe, and understand the essence of the lived experiences.

Qualitative phenomenological research relies on the intellectual and skillful abilities of the researcher to draw deep understanding of the common experience (Creswell, 2013). By using a phenomenological approach, the researcher assumes that the participants are conscious of the experience (Creswell, 2013), are aware of the phenomenon and how it occurs, and have all experienced the common “thing” itself. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a particular type of phenomenology that relies heavily on researcher intellectual and skillful abilities as well as the vivid articulation of the participant to recount a lived experience as it occurred in its raw form. IPA is the theoretical and methodological framework that allows the research to unfold and understand individuals’ complex experiences in a way that could benefit the research community.

When working within an emerging research design that presents a holistic, complex account of the lived experiences being studied, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, it is imperative that the research framework and methodology are able to handle the complexity of lived experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 44-47; Smith et al., 2013). For this study, it was important to understand several individuals’ common experiences in order to understand if and how public school PK-12 principals recognize and understand the role of unlearning when facilitating school improvement. Not all phenomenological frameworks focus on understanding lived experiences.

The IPA researcher seeks to move beyond description to understanding (Smith et al., 2013), which is why IPA is being utilized for this study. Additionally, IPA is being utilized because the framework is psychologically based and unlearning is concerned with changing a person's mind or perspective about something that causes them to behave differently.

For this qualitative study, participants are public school PK-12<sup>th</sup> grade principals who have successfully facilitated a school improvement effort that required unlearning. Further, this research assumes that principals are the main agents that facilitated the school improvement effort.

### **Ontological Assumptions**

Acknowledging that each principal may facilitate school improvement differently and analyzing each unique experience (Creswell, 2013) allows the researcher to remain open to the inductive qualitative research process. The reality is that the PK-12 principals in the study may encounter similar experiences while facilitating change because of federal and state mandates of curricular standards and assessments; however, how each principal interprets and addresses school improvement may differ. Creswell (2013) asserts that understanding that engaging in imaginative variation, viewing data from different perspectives, can strengthen the depth of meaning of the essence of the phenomenon. In this study, the researcher can view the data from the different principal perspectives and as a former campus leader herself.

### **Epistemological Assumptions**

Through verbal responses from the participants and studying and coding of the transcripts, the researcher is able to construct meaning of the participants' conscious and

lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009) and how the researcher justifies her claims to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The IPA framework itself assumes that the researcher is skilled at listening, interpreting, understanding, and analyzing in an unbiased manner. Interview questions used in an IPA study cannot directly ask the participant about the phenomenon itself, but rather must be broad enough to allow the essence to surface but be specific enough to allow the essence to appear. This means that the researcher must collect enough data to understand the individual and combined experiences in order to allow a phenomenon to appear but not lead the participants into solely describing and ascribing meaning to the phenomenon. Further, IPA assumes that the participants' will recall their lived experiences in their original, raw forms.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a phenomenological qualitative approach that examines how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2013). In 1996, Jonathan Smith introduced a paper at a conference that called for a phenomenological framework for psychology that captures the lived experiences of individuals (Smith et al., 2013). IPA was constructed by Johnathan Smith as a philosophical framework and methodology for the field of psychology. IPA is concerned with “what happens when everyday flow of lived experiences takes on particular significance to people” (Smith et al., 2013, p.1). In this study, the lived experience is facilitating school improved. The researcher attempts to understand if and how unlearning plays a role. IPA combines the major contributions of the theories and methods of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, and Schleiermacher (Dowling, 2007; Smith et al., 2013). IPA includes phenomenology because lived

experiences are studied and analyzed. IPA takes up hermeneutics because the lived experiences are interpreted by the participant and the researcher. Finally, IPA is idiographic in nature because the researcher considers the individual parts of lived experiences that make up the whole in great detail.

A phenomenological interpretive framework is most commonly used to study affective, emotional, and intense human experiences (Merriam, 2009). IPA was chosen over narrative because in narrative frameworks, one records and reports the story or stories of individuals whereas in phenomenology, one seeks to understand (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2013) through a number of stories. An approach that utilizes interpretation seeks to make meaning of the participants' experiences in order to present the data and experiences in a way that helps others to understand (Merriam, 2009). Presenting the experience in a way that helps others to understand and to contribute to a field of knowledge is the charge of a researcher who utilizes an interpretative approach.

IPA is a philosophical framework and methodology for capturing the lived experiences of individuals (Smith et al., 2013). IPA is concerned with understanding every day lived experiences of individuals and across experiences. In this study, the lived experience is public school PK-12 principals who have successfully facilitated school improvement. The researcher attempts to understand if and how unlearning plays a role when principals facilitate school improvement. IPA is appropriate for the study because it combines hermeneutics, idiography, and phenomenology and utilizes specific, but flexible, methods for research purposes in order to acknowledge, interpret, analyze, and understand individual and collective individuals' meaning and sense-making of their lived experiences.

Questions included in an IPA study focus on people's understanding of their experiences in a particular context (Smith et al., 2013); in other words, the research questions must focus on the process of understanding and sense making of the lived experience rather than the description of the experience.

Participants were selected based on the potential experiences they may have engaged in and because they represented a perspective rather than a population being studied (Smith et al., 2013). Because of the nature of interpretative idiographic phenomenological research, IPA requires a "purposive homogenous sampling" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 49) in order to make the research more meaningful. While a homogenous sample is necessary for IPA research, it is also important to note how the individual lived experiences converge and diverge within the study (Smith et al., 2013).

### **Purpose of Study**

There are a number of studies in the business field that have focused on organizational unlearning (Akgun, Lynn et al., 2006; Akgun, Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; de Holan et al., 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008) but very little research on this topic has been conducted in the field of education. The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to understand how organizational unlearning may occur in an educational setting through public school PK-12 principal leadership. The research questions that guide this study are: How do public school PK-12 principals understand the role of unlearning while successfully facilitating school improvement? And, how does a principal's awareness of unlearning influence his/her facilitation of the school improvement process? Underlying research questions are: To what extent can the

successful facilitation of school improvement be attributed to unlearning, and what factors need to be present in order for organization unlearning to occur? This study will seek to understand unlearning in an educational setting.

### **Participant Selection**

IPA requires a “purposive homogenous sampling” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 49) in order to make the research more meaningful. The perspective I was interested in exploring was that of principals who have successfully facilitated school improvement that involved the process of unlearning. The principals were selected based on events they may have experienced. The phenomenon I was interested in understanding was unlearning. In order to study this phenomenon through this perspective, I identified five principals who self-reportedly have successfully facilitated school improvement through the process of unlearning. Four of the five participants were sitting principals, while the remaining participant was recently succeeded by a new principal; that participant continues to play an active role in the school though he no longer serves as principal. This participant is included in the study because he served as founding principal who helped design and open the school. For the purpose of this study, all participants are referred to as principals. The lived experiences of all five principals are included in the data analysis. The principals provided artifacts to support their claims of successful implementation. Participants were principals who met the following criteria:

- were currently serving as principals of schools that have non-traditional structures and processes;

- have led or were leading the successful transformation or development of becoming a non-traditional school or were establishing non-traditional processes of teaching and learning; and
- were engaged in the process of unlearning as part of the transformation or development of becoming a non-traditional school or establishing a non-traditional process of teaching and learning.

Participants were principals who have successfully facilitated school improvement in a way that provoked staff to unlearn beliefs and behaviors commonly held by those who teach in a traditional school setting. Additionally, the principals of these schools must have led the development or transformation of these schools.

Nontraditional school status includes those schools of which principals have reconceptualized the school experience. In other words, principals have created environments in which students learn by doing, forming partnerships with the community, and/or are major contributors in the design of their learning. The principals selected for this study provided evidence of being a non-traditional school beyond self-admission or simply a name change and evidence of successfully facilitating the school improvement they identified that involved unlearning. Principals could have provided pre and post data that demonstrated the successful transition to a non-traditional school. The data could have included but were not limited to agenda and meeting minutes; climate surveys; community feedback surveys; and documents that demonstrate staff, community, and student positive changes in perception and achievement. Principals were able to provide documents and video and audio files that demonstrated the successful facilitation of school improvement. Additionally, the nontraditional school day may or



may not occur within structured walls or be dictated by 45 minute-90 minute rotation schedules facilitated by bells as found in traditional U.S. public schools. Further, in a nontraditional school, the curriculum is not prepackaged and is instead designed and learned through the practice of engaging in real life situations. Next, a nontraditional school could be one in which there is a specific, nontraditional curricular and instructional focus, as sustainable living schools, in which students learn math, science, reading, and language through that particular concentration. Selecting principals of nontraditional schools could increase the possibility of obtaining rich lived experiences of unlearning from principals who have successfully facilitated school improvement.

I identified nontraditional schools from Internet searches, refereed research articles on unlearning in education, referrals from fellow educators to schools that meet the nontraditional school criteria, and through snowball sampling. After identifying nontraditional schools through referrals, Internet searches, and refereed research articles I researched the school histories via information provided from school websites or phone inquiries to the schools in order to determine if the current principals have been or were currently facilitating school improvement efforts that resulted in the schools being non-traditional.

I compiled a list of 10 potential principals identified through referrals, Internet searches, and refereed research articles. For each participant, I kept a record of data regarding the school and principal (Appendix A). I contacted the principals via phone and email to introduce myself, area of study, and to inquire about their processes of facilitating school improvement. During the phone conversations and introductory email to potential participants, I described to principals the concept of unlearning to add another

layer of assurance that the principal has actually facilitated school improvement through the process of unlearning. I created a script (Appendix B) so that all participants received, at the minimum, the same description of unlearning. While IPA requires that direct questions not be asked during the interview itself, it was necessary to screen the participant selection so that I was sure that the phenomenon has occurred. During the conversation, principals who met the above criteria were asked to provide documents and/or video and audio tapes that demonstrate their successful facilitation of school improvement. During the phone conversation, I hand recorded their responses to the initial screening (Appendix C) for later review.

After the phone conversation/screening, principals who met the above criteria were notified via email within 24 hours if they qualified for the study (Appendix D). In the email communication to those who qualified, I requested an appointment to visit the school and principal in order to conduct the interview. After all participants were notified, I made a travel schedule to conduct the interviews, confirmed with the participants via email, and booked the travel and lodging arrangements. Before interviews began, principals reviewed and signed the consent to participate in the study (Appendix E). During the in-person school visit and after each interview, I observed the school in operation and talked with personnel (when permitted) in order to gain a better understanding of the context of the situation. As Smith et al. (2013) notes “the participant should have been granted an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 56). Five principals’ experiences are included in the data analysis. The small homogenous sample allowed me to analyze the individual and group experiences

with depth. When necessary, after the in-person interviews, I followed up with principals via phone and email to clarify and collect more data.

## **Data Collection**

IPA requires a “purposive homogenous sampling” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 49) in order to make the research more meaningful. I identified 10 and selected five principals who self-reportedly have successfully facilitated school improvement through the process of unlearning to participate in this study.

The principals were identified through snowball sampling and Internet searches for nontraditional schools. I created and maintained participant data collection charts (Appendix A) to keep track of each recommendation made by colleagues through snowball sampling and potential participants I found while conducting Internet searches. The data collection charts contain information such as: type of school and focus, grade level and characteristics, location, nontraditional status, students’ learning styles, evidence that could be provided by a potential participant, curriculum design, contact dates, consent form status, interview and follow up interview dates. The information included in these charts are what I used to identify which principals met the initial study criteria and who could potentially qualify for the study. I contacted 10 principals of traditional and nontraditional schools and received some level of response from nine.

I conducted one audio-recorded semi-structured face-to-face interview with each participant at the participants’ schools. The interview times ranged from 45 minutes to 87 minutes, with four of the five interviews lasting at least 60 minutes. When interviews required clarification of and additional data collection, I followed up with the principals via phone and email.

During the semi-structured interview, participants responded to 12 open-ended questions/statements that focused on recounting their lived experiences of successfully

facilitating school improvement that involved unlearning. I created an interview schedule (Appendix H) in order to help facilitate a meaningful conversation. Additionally, I utilized my dissertation chair as a resource to ensure I was collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data accurately.

The principals who participated in the study provided artifacts to support their claims of successfully facilitating school improvement. The artifacts included press releases, board minutes, campus meeting agendas, audio recorded teacher testaments, school schedules, copies of emails, news media initiated articles, state generated assessment reports, professional development plans, professional development proposals, surveys, confidential and public internal staff memos, school budgets, and school demographic data. I read and analyzed each artifact that I found and that was provided by the participant. In order to determine if the artifacts supported a principal's claims to the school improvement initiative being successful, I underlined repeated words and phrases, studied the context in which the communication was drafted and who drafted it, and studied word choice and language in order to analyze the tone of the documents. When I finished taking notes on all the artifacts, first, I wrote a summary of my findings and concluded if the artifacts provided to, and found by, the researcher supported the claim of the school improvement initiative being successful and to what extent. I also considered anecdotes told during the interview by the principals as artifacts for consideration.

All schools in the study are public charter schools. Principals in traditional schools and the research and evaluation departments that process research study requests for the traditional public school districts were contacted as well but none resulted in qualifying for the study. One traditional public school's research and evaluation department

responded that none of the schools I requested to participate in the study met the study criteria of establishing nontraditional structures or processes or being a nontraditional school. Two principals of that particular district declined to participate; however, a third principal believed a process he established at his school qualified him for the study based upon the study criteria of establishing a nontraditional process; the principal implemented actual Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a nontraditional process for professional development. His school district's research and evaluation department indicated his school did not qualify.

A second traditional public school research and evaluation department communicated with me via email. The last communication I received from the director of the department was that he was taking my request to the board, and despite me sending the director follow up emails, I did not receive a response indicating rejection, pending review, or acceptance of my application to conduct research. The same scenario of no response occurred at two other charter schools in which principals stated they would ask their supervisors for permission to participate in the study but did not respond to my follow up communication. Last, one organization that is a network of nontraditional schools throughout the United States did not respond at all.

The study reports, interprets, and analyzes the principals' individual lived experiences of facilitating school improvement both individually and collectively. The study includes participants' interpretations of their lived experiences and the researcher's interpretation of the participants' understanding of their lived experiences in what Schleiermacher termed double hermeneutics (Smith, 2013). Double hermeneutics is when the researcher is making sense of the participants making sense of the lived experience

(Smith, 2013). The study includes direct statements from the transcripts of each participant's interview and an analysis of the artifacts provided by each participant and the researcher on the respective school and industry related websites. The data analysis relied upon transcripts of interviews, researcher school observations, artifacts provided by each participant and the researcher, participants member checking the transcripts, and researcher follow up requests for additional and clarifying information via email.

Participants provided personal and professional information in order for the researcher to understand their lived experiences in the context in which they occurred (Smith, 2013). After listening, reading, reviewing, memoing, interpreting, and categorizing the data, overarching themes and supporting themes emerged. Themes that were common across all participants became the overarching themes and are included in this analysis as well as significant anomalous experiences.

The demographic and work history of each participant is included (Table 2) to provide a profile of each participant and their schools. Each participant's response to some of the semi structured interview questions is included below to create a profile that provides context as to who each is as a school principal and to provide context in which the school improvement occurred or is currently occurring.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was guided by the data collection procedures identified by Smith et al. (2013). Considering this was my first time conducting a qualitative study using IPA, I followed the six suggestions given by Smith, et al (2013): (a) Read and reread the original data, (b) Make initial notes to examine the language at an exploratory level, (c) Develop supporting themes from the data, (d) Search for connections across supporting

themes, (e) Move toward the next case to start the process over, and (f) Look for patterns across cases (pp. 82-106). Each participant's case was analyzed individually; all cases were analyzed holistically.

First, the interview data were transcribed. For the first time, I listened to the audio recording of the interview without making notes. The second time, I followed along using the transcript to ensure the interview was accurately transcribed. After the transcription was complete, I returned the transcripts to the participants via email with a due date so that they could check for accuracy, which Bazeley (2013) referred to as member checking. In this way the participant was allowed to include any information that would add to the clarity, meaning, and understanding of the recorded lived experience. Consequently, being allowed to member check could have resulted in a participant modifying his/her response to present a more colorful picture of the lived experience than what actually occurred; however, after reviewing the transcripts, four of the five participants responded via email that there were no modifications to the transcripts; one participant never responded despite reminders.

After transcription, I analyzed the transcripts line-by-line to ensure that the participant remained the focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2013). During this process, as the researcher, I engaged in memoing (Bazeley, 2013) in order to continue the bracketing process and release any presupposing thoughts that could prevent the sole concentration on participant responses. I made notes of questions that arose while reviewing the transcripts, contradictions made, thematic patterns that emerged, and questions about statements that needed participant clarification.



Next, the transcript data were open coded (Creswell, 2013) (Appendix I-J). I engaged in exploratory noting (Smith et al., 2013) in order to produce a comprehensive set of notes. The notes were a combination of categories—descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual (Smith et al., 2013) to assist me as a novice researcher in organizing and identifying the data in a meaningful way. During this process my leadership experience played a key role in what is already known about facilitating school improvement and what was revealed about facilitating school improvement through the data. Because I am experienced with facilitating school improvement, I was careful to not generalize descriptions and definitions of academic terminology used by participants as though they were the same as I interpret them when in fact, there were different meanings. I made written and mental notes of my own descriptions and definitions of academic terminology and reviewed the descriptions of academic terminology given by participants to compare/contrast.

Third, developing themes requires the researcher to move beyond the obvious and superficial to more conceptual, robust connections with the data; this is where the focus gravitates from the participant to the researcher (Smith et al., 2013). I, as the researcher, then became responsible for making sense of the data. Next, after coding was complete, I searched for connections across the data (Appendix K) to determine what themes emerge (Smith et al., 2013). After I analyzed the first case, I repeated the process for the remaining cases, eventually looking for patterns across all cases (Appendix L). All cases were reviewed and open coded (Creswell, 2013). While looking for patterns, I engaged in imaginative variation (Creswell, 2013) which allowed me to view the data from different perspectives in order to arrive at the phenomenological essence in a comprehensive

manner. In other words, I reviewed the data from multiple angles to address the complexity of identifying a phenomenon from the lived experiences. This process of imaginative variation coincided with a variation of what Smith et al. (2013) identify as double hermeneutics—in which the participant interprets the meaning of the experience while the researcher interprets the participant’s meaning of the experiences. Additionally, another perspective from which the researcher viewed this process is from that of a leader in education. As required by IPA, I engaged in bracketing to ensure I did not presuppose my beliefs and interpretations onto what the participant shared.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is concerned with “what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience take on particular significance to people (Smith, et al., 2013, p. 1). In this study, the everyday lived experience is public school principals facilitating school reform or school improvement. I attempted to understand if principals consider the process of unlearning when facilitating school improvement as research has shown changing people’s mindset is the most effective way to obtaining school reform or improvement (Senge, 1990). In order to understand participants’ lived experiences, I as the researcher, subscribed to the theoretical and methodological tenets of IPA. I had to bracket, understand, interpret, and analyze the interviews and artifacts provided by participants. IPA combines three components for phenomenological interpretative research: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Idiography.

### **Phenomenological Interpretative Research**

The phenomenon I was interested in studying was unlearning. Each of the participants recounted their experiences that involved facilitating school improvement through the process of unlearning. As characteristic of interpretative phenomenological

studies, I had to first consider the lived experiences of each participant independently of one another in order to understand the individuals and context from which they spoke before I could identify and understand them as a whole. Husserl believed that a researcher must engage in bracketing. As a school administrator, I had to be mindful of my own experiences, interpretations, descriptions, and definitions of education jargon so that I did not presupposed my own descriptions, definitions, and interpretations to mean the same as the participants. In order to understand the participant and my own experiences, I defined education terms and reviewed the context in which the participant used that term in order to ensure that the participants' meaning is what I understood and not my own. Through memoing and answering the research questions myself, I was able to bracket my own assumptions and preconceptions in order to identify and understand the phenomenon as it emerged from each participant's recount of his/her lived experiences.

As with Husserl's belief that an experience should be examined in its natural form, I interviewed the participants over the phone and in their respective environments in which the phenomenon occurred. Heidegger believed that the researcher must engage in a reciprocal relationship of hermeneutics in order to get at the real essence of the phenomenon. The semi structured interviews allowed the researcher and participants to engage in dialogue and feedback that allowed the researcher to ask unscripted questions to clarify statements made by the participant and gave the participants an opportunity to dialogue with the researcher about whatever was on their minds.

Next, Gadamer emphasized that an important component to hermeneutics is understanding the role linguistics played in participants' recount of their lived

experiences. To address the role that linguistics play in hermeneutics, I listened carefully to the language participants used, the fluidity with which they expressed their experiences, the sentence structures they used, and how they pronounced words.

Additionally, Sartre emphasized that understanding both what is said and what is not said is relative to the context in which the phenomenon occurs. I listened carefully to what the participants stated and reviewed the language contained in the artifacts they provided me. Additionally, I considered what the participants did not say when they retold their experiences.

Fourth, Sartre (Smith et al., 2013) stressed the importance of context. Each principal attempted to successfully facilitate school improvement in nontraditional schools of choice with enrollment ranging from 70 to 400 students. Four of the principals' schools were less than four years old, while the fifth principal's school has been in operation for over 20 years. All principals have experience with traditional public school education as teachers and administrators. Each principal spoke of the relationship with their communities as part of the context in which they facilitated school improvement. Husserl believed every mental act is related to something and all perceptions have meaning; the principals shared their descriptions/experiences of traditional and nontraditional schools.

Fifth, Merleau-Ponty coined the phrase "phenomenology of origins" in which he believed individuals should view their experiences in a new light without relying on categories of reflective experience or pre-reflective experience. The participants stated they had not reflected on facilitating their respective school improvement/reform initiatives prior to the interviews at the level at they did during the interviews. Next, hermeneutics poses the question whether the researcher can recover the intended meaning

of the participant. For this study, I attempted to achieve the intended meaning through the initial email and phone screening, campus observations, returning the transcript to the participant for member checking, and asking clarifying questions when information appeared not to be clear. I collected and recorded principal profile data on a chart gathered from school websites, interviews, observations, and artifacts in order to consider the historical context of where they come from and where they currently work. As Sartre noted, the technical and humanistic parts of interpretation are needed in order to understand the parts and the whole.

Last, idiography completes IPA by causing the researcher to outline a systematic approach to analyzing individual cases in detail in order to arrive at generalities that appear across cases—themes. I collected data for each participant experience individually and then analyzed them individually and collectively allowing the essence of the experiences to emerge. Idiography makes it possible to show that the phenomenon exists.

The structure of Chapter 4 allows the researcher to present each participant as individuals as well as to see them as a collective body of experiences demonstrated in the thematic write up. The data analysis results are written in narrative form accompanied by extractions from the transcripts which support the results/analysis (Smith et al., 2013). The narrative is organized by themes. The evidence from each participant that supports the themes will be reported individually as well as holistically throughout the narrative. The report includes two sections of the analysis—one is discussion of the data presented as principal profiles and the other identifies and analyzes the themes.

## **Trustworthiness, Transferability, & Ethics**

This phenomenological study is an attempt to understand (Creswell, 2013) organizational unlearning in education through principal leadership; it is not an attempt to validate any measures. Because the goal is to understand and not validate, the context and intent of participants' language will remain true to form. Being able to determine the trustworthiness of participants and the research study itself, I have subscribed to Wolcott's (Creswell, 2013) perspective of validation as neither guiding or informing the work but rather identifying critical elements and writing "plausible interpretations" (p. 247). Three qualitative validation strategies will include researcher bracketing; obtaining rich, thick description from participants; and consensual validation by allowing participants to review and modify transcripts and my dissertation chair to provide feedback on accuracy of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Bracketing is a process in which the researcher acknowledges and understands one's biases related to the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). I chose to utilize rich, thick description because it allowed the researcher to collect descriptive, detailed data that will assist readers of the study to transfer information obtained during the study to other settings—from school to school, from unlearning in firms to unlearning in education. Last, Eisner suggests that utilizing consensual validation allows the researcher to include the participants and other researchers knowledgeable about the concepts, to analyze, agree, or disagree "that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of an educational situation are right" (p. 246, as cited in Creswell, 2013).

Along with subscribing to the guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), ethical considerations include being careful not to stereotype or label during

the selection process, the semi-structured interviews, data analysis, interpretation, and publishing stages. The researcher/participant relationship must be based on trust and reciprocity (Creswell, 2013; Gibbs, 2008). A researcher uses “oneself to help make sense of the participant”, not to make sense of himself or herself. (Smith et al., 2013, p. 90). I have worked in the public school sector as a campus and district level administrator who was responsible for facilitating school improvement. In order to ensure that I did not impose my own responses to the research questions upon the interpretation of the participants’ responses, I answered the research questions on paper and defined commonly used academic language such as school reform, school improvement, standardized assessments, non-traditional, and traditional. Throughout the research process, I made notes in my journal and on transcripts when I had a question, idea, made a connection, discovered an anomaly, or identified a contradiction. Line-by-line coding of all transcripts aided in the bracketing process as I had to analyze and interpret the meaning of the participants’ words. If I found myself using academic terminology during memoing, I reviewed the text and my words of choice to ensure they accurately reflected what the participant intended to convey.

### **Possible Contributions to the Field**

Studying and understanding unlearning through principal leadership in a PK-12 setting have implications on the role of unlearning in schools during organizational change/school improvement. Giving voice to this invisible variable of learning can shed light on how and/or why some PK-12 schools learn and others do not. Since unlearning can potentially affect the growth of an organization, being able to understand what role it plays in schools is critical information for school leaders who engage in the change

process. Identifying when unlearning should occur and under what circumstances can inform the process of school improvement. In organizational unlearning literature, researchers note the effects that unlearning has on organizations (Akgun, Lynn et al., 2006; Becker, 2010; Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan et al., 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Specifically, they note that those organizations which successfully and continuously reinvent themselves have noted unlearning as a contributing factor to the success (Akgun, Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006; de Holan et al., 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009). Because unlearning has implications for human behavior and actions, it reaffirms the notion that human capital, whether principal leadership or a staff member, is a significant factor, if not the most, in organizational change (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Wheatley, 2002).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a relatively new theoretical framework and methodology. IPA is an emerging theory, is primarily utilized in the field of psychology. Although other social science fields are slowly attempting to utilize it, application of the theoretical framework and methodology has not been widely utilized in education. Additionally, the majority of the unlearning literature is concentrated in the business field; however, educational research tends to borrow elements from the business sector. Next, because IPA does not allow for causal effects to be determined, the study assumes components of successful school improvement can be attributed to unlearning.

Further, the participants in this study represent a relatively narrow sample of principals who may be engaged with unlearning. Although potential participants from



traditional public schools as well as public charter schools were identified, I was unable to secure any participants from traditional public schools due. While several principals of traditional schools indicated they met the criteria for participation, district IRB personnel indicated they did not and, therefore, did not grant permission for the study. This resulted in the sample being comprised of principals from public secondary charter schools.

#### **IV. DATA**

This chapter includes the results of the study. The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013) was to explore unlearning in education, focusing on how PK-12 principals experienced unlearning while successfully facilitating school improvement.

Participants provided personal and professional information in order for the researcher to understand their lived experiences in the context within which they occurred (Smith, 2013). While listening, reading, reviewing, memoing, interpreting, and categorizing the data, themes emerged. Themes that were common across all participants are included in this analysis as well as significant anomalous experiences.

The demographic and work history of each participant is included (Table 1) to provide a profile of each participant and the context of the environments in which they work. Additionally, Table 1 identifies the school improvement/reform initiative each participant is facilitating or has facilitated.

Table 1  
*School Information*

Participant Name	Yrs. of Administrative Experience	School & Level	Number of Students	Nontraditional School Focus	Facilitating School Improvement or School Reform
Charles The Action Research Principal	10+ years	Newman School 6-12 <sup>th</sup>	570+		Action Research as school improvement
Kenneth The Communication Principal	15 years	George Mason School 6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup>	77	Sustainable Living focus	Establishing communication as school improvement
Thomas The Educational Entrepreneur	8+ years	Adams Academy, 9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>	300+	Construction Industry focus	Establishing a nontraditional school as school reform
Tanya The PYD Principal	1+ years	Adams Academy 9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>	300+	Construction Industry focus	Establishing a culture of addressing the whole child as school improvement
Brenda The Servant Leader Principal	15 years	Henderson High School Academy 9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>	300+	Healthcare Industry focus	Establishing a culture of addressing discipline through assets based approach as school improvement

### Principal Profiles

#### Participant 1: Charles, The Action Research Principal

Charles is a native of the city in which he works and is the principal of Newman School, a non-traditional charter school in the southern United States that serves students in the 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades. Newman School has been in operation for almost 20 years, and Charles has presided as principal for the last three years. Charles stated he was influenced to leave the public government sector to become an educator because many relatives, including his wife, are educators and because of his own adolescent experiences in school. Charles recounted the factors that led to his decision to change career paths to education:

I thought I was going to pursue a career in local politics or state politics, government....I decided to use my professional experience, my personal experience to go back and get my teaching certification and getting into the

classroom. ...I always had that kind of that John Dewey kind of sensibility of how do you make education relevant, experiential, how do you make it applicable to the lives of kids?

Charles has 10 years of experience as a campus assistant principal and principal in three local school districts; seven of the 10 years have been in traditional schools at both the elementary and secondary levels. He was so honored and excited at the opportunity to become a principal that he sought advisement from seasoned principals and leaders, and studied research based practices to inform his leadership style. While excited and honored at the opportunity to serve as principal of a new school, Charles felt a void in his career while working in traditional public school—that void being the predictability and inflexible structures of traditional public schools. Predictability and inflexible structures are what prompted Charles to look for a different education setting.

So I worked [at a traditional public school] and there was something that intrigued me...I was still kind of figuring out like this achievement gap and how are teachers teaching and I wanted something different. So I started exploring and I came across a vacancy at Newman School. I read their mission statement and looked at their website and what they're all about. There was something about the philosophy that connected with who I was as a teacher....I was like, "Yeah, I like that."

Instead of creating the environment he desired as the founding principal, Charles sought a different environment that matched his teaching philosophy—one that valued creative learning, since this type of creative learning was not happening at his own campus.

I think at the core of Newman School is learning...that's... creative, innovative learning, not didactic instruction. It's the project based learning that's at the core of this place, grooming leaders, service learning.

The philosophy of Newman School suggests that education should be experiential and hands-on. Charles identified the school's philosophy as one of the characteristics that make Newman School non-traditional. When asked the difference between Newman School and a traditional school in the United States, Charles stated:

...I think the school calendar is, to me, conducive to higher retention of student learning. I think the other thing that's unique about Newman School is the early release on Fridays....the rest of the day is dedicated to professional learning.

...One thing that comes to my mind are study trips... So it's [sic] really connected to the learning. I think that's unique....this is a school of choice and the parents deliberately select this school to enroll their student. They want to be here, they want to be involved with the education of their child...

...our school board is non-traditional...there's [sic] two parent spots permanently on the school board. We also have four teachers on that school board. We have a community member. Also the textbook is not the driving force of the curriculum. ...whatever your creative juices can muster up, try it. I try to allow them to teach without a lot of restraints.

Charles identified operational characteristics such as scheduling, being able to hire midyear, and one philosophical characteristic (being able to take a risk) as making Newman School nontraditional. Charles' frame of reference for identifying Newman

School as nontraditional was the previous traditional elementary and secondary schools at which he worked.

Charles identified action research as the way in which he and the teachers approach professional development as a nontraditional process of teaching and learning that involved unlearning. Action research is an approach to researching and taking action steps to improve an identified problem; it is a process which prompts individuals to understand their own situations by taking ownership of the process, action, and results, leading to understanding. (Dustman, Kohan, & Stringer, 2014). Charles identified this process as nontraditional because, according to him, traditional schools generally do not provide differentiated opportunities for professional development; everyone gets the same professional development regardless of their level of expertise or topic of interest. With action research as the nontraditional process of holding teachers responsible for their own learning and development, opportunities for differentiated, individualized professional development were created for the staff at Newman School.

Charles cited his professional and personal experiences as preparing himself to successfully facilitate the implementation of action research.

We [mentor and colleagues] went up to New York City...to study the small schools movement, the Deborah Meier schools in Manhattan. That trip I tell you had a tremendous impact on the possibilities of what schools can be. I mean, these are schools [that] used to be large comprehensive schools, 2-3,000 kids, but now they were broken up into small schools like 2-300 kids. ...innovation, the rigor, the students taking ownership of their learning, the presentations, the research, it was mind boggling to see young people who would travel on a subway 45

minutes to an hour to get to a school because they wanted to learn. ...I've never experienced that before to see kids on fire for learning.

...[the] first 14 years of life, [I] lived in Camden. So I got a chance to see or experience what inequality really looks like and how it impacts schools... in a way that kind of drives my passion for education ... and I feel really fortunate to have survived that environment 'cause a lot of people in that environment don't make it out successfully, unfortunately make it out.

After the face-to-face interview, Charles provided action research professional development schedules and agendas. Initially, via the phone interview and later during the face-to-face interview, Charles stated I could interview the staff, and he would provide me with videos of the teachers' end of the year action research presentations that would demonstrate success with action research and unlearning. Charles did not follow through despite repeated requests via phone and email. Additionally, Charles rescheduled my observation of the teachers engaging in action research professional development three times, ultimately resulting in no observation being conducted.

## **Participant 2: Kenneth, The Communication Principal**

Kenneth is the second principal participant in the study. Kenneth is currently the head of school at George Mason School in the northern United States. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to Kenneth as a principal to keep the leadership title consistent among all participants. George Mason School is a secondary campus for 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders. He has been in his current position at George Mason for two and one half months. George Mason School was previously a Montessori school and was reopened four years ago as a district supported charter school. Kenneth was a parent of George Mason School,

which provided him with a unique perspective as he assumed his new role as head of school. Kenneth has over 10 years of experience as an assistant principal and principal in traditional public secondary schools with student populations ranging from 400 to over 2,000 students. Kenneth has worked in traditional public schools his entire teaching and administrative career until now. At times Kenneth alluded to traditional public schools being structured, rigid, and focused on standardized assessment while at other times, he explicitly stated this.

Kenneth identified school size, student freedom, curriculum and instruction and operational practices coinciding with the focus of the school—sustainable living—as characteristics that make his school non-traditional. Additionally, Kenneth stated George Mason is set apart from traditional schools because of the school board’s philosophy of education and the fact the staff is open to practicing different possibilities to make school better.

Kenneth: It's [George Mason School] different on multiple levels. I think first of all its size. We're a very manageable size. ...according to State Department of Education standards, we could fit 128 students in this building. That would not be educationally sound from our point of view. And I think that that leads me to the biggest differentiator between George Mason and other schools that I've been associated with, and that decisions are not being made based on economics. We have a board, in spite of the fact that we're a public school, that's dedicated to fund development, in alternative ways... They're much more dedicated to go in that route than they would be packing the school with students just because we need to have a bottom-line in that.



In addition to the school board's philosophy and the staff's willingness to try different things, Kenneth identified student perspective and living, the philosophy of George Mason, as contributing to its nontraditional status.

It appeared as though Kenneth had reached his limit and was frustrated with being an educator in a traditional setting as evidenced by his strong language. The passion and intensity with which Kenneth spoke these statements clearly demonstrated his adamant stance not return to traditional public school due to his experiences. Kenneth mentioned after 15 years in traditional public school, it has been a challenge for him to “de-traditionalize” his approach to leading a school and facilitating school improvement. After many years of being programmed to respond, react, and administrate within the guidelines of a traditional school, being named principal of George Mason School was a welcomed opportunity as it presented the option to be different. Kenneth noted:

From my point of view, I spent 15 years in traditional education. I got to a point where I realized I couldn't put in another 15 years without becoming the people I had worked against for the first 15 years. ...I was doing international relief work when I got the call for this position. I was as far from education in a traditional sense as I could possibly get. I think it was almost a period of self-exile from education to reflect on what I wanted to do for the latter half of my career. Why I was open to the school? Has to do frankly with a certain degree of blank canvas that George Mason represents as an educational leader.

Kenneth's first relationship with George Mason School was as a parent, and as a result, his experiences as a parent and his initial observations of school operations helped inform his decision about what to focus on for school improvement as a new leader.

Kenneth decided that communication among staff, between the staff and school board, and communication between staff and families (students included) was in need of serious improvement. Kenneth used data from parent surveys that indicated communication was a weakness of the school.

But I know that when I look at the data from that survey as well as my own personal experience as a parent, the communication was by far one of the biggest fault done...it was home school communication and it was, frankly, staff the student communication.

Next, Kenneth's preparation and experience in a traditional school setting taught him to be reactive and quick to put out fires, sometimes even where problems did not exist. Now that he has a blank slate to make George Mason the school he wants it to be and to become the leader necessary to facilitate that change. Kenneth has learned to be patient. He stressed the importance of having patience and the experiences of making mistakes as being most influential in how he has approached leading a nontraditional school and facilitating school improvement.

But I'm not gonna do what I normally would have done which is to rush and then fix a problem that I haven't even really proven exists yet. I'm really trying to infuse all my decision making with that same mentality. I don't want to rush in and start dictating changes before I have an understanding of the implications of the practices that are in place.

I don't have all the answers...I need them [staff] to feel open in expressing to me in a non-threatening environment...best practice norms in an alternative setting is making sure that the avenues of communication between me and the

staff are free from fear and intimidation and recrimination as possible that they understand that I might be judging what's happening or evaluating what's happening in a way that's not necessarily flattering but that's not a threat to anyone's employment, [and] it's not part of any formal evaluation of an individual's performance. It's just more of a programmatic performance.

Patience has played a significant role in improving communication:

I think it involves care in every single interaction you have. I think if you become impatient or snippy or curt even once, you can set a work relationship back weeks, particularly when the relationship is in and of itself only weeks old to begin with. I've spent a lot of time biting my tongue and waiting for the opportune time. I think it's just, there's a whole laundry list of ways in which you make people feel safe in a work environment...And making sure that people understand you value them as a human being.

As part of the evidence to show the success of the school improvement initiative, Kenneth provided emails, memos to staff, letters to parents, meeting agendas, schedules—which were not created, provided, or shared with any stakeholders in the previous three years by the previous leadership with the exception of board meeting minutes being the most consistent form of communication. I, as the researcher, observed calendars, signage, the staff in action; school in operation; staff communicating with visitors; and schedules that served as communication for staff, parents, students, and visitors. While many of these communication systems are in place in traditional school, this demonstrates Kenneth's learning, expectations, and influences of traditional schools

that communication is essential to effectively operating a school both internally and externally.

I feel very confident that we are doing exceptionally well on all of those [communication documents and processes]. Now I can show you archives of the success just in the amount of communication that we've pushed out in the form of email, and letters home, the events we've had here physically in the school or inviting parents in. The fact that I begin in everyday, standing out by those orange cones and talk to every single parent, either it's with a hi, or goodbye, or if they need to, they can roll down the window and pull forward, we can talk. I dropped my son off here for 360 days over two years and never one saw a staff member out in front of this building... that's why I think this visibility, both physical visibility as well as communicative visibility is absolutely critical. Again it's anecdotal, but the feedback particularly from the returning parents has been enough to give any of us a real big head inside the building. We're so happy with the communication, keep up the communication.

### **Participant 3: Thomas, The Educational Entrepreneur**

The third participant, Thomas, is the former principal of Adams Academy, a public charter school in the southwest region of the United States. Adams Academy is a secondary school that serves students who are in 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade up to 24 years of age. The students of Adams Academy can take courses during the day or evening. Thomas just completed his term as principal of Adams Academy but maintains an active role in the sustainability of the school. Thomas is included in this study because his departure as

school principal was three months before the new school year began, he facilitated the school reform that involved unlearning, and maintains an active role at Adams Academy.

Thomas is originally from the city in which he works. Thomas attended college for finance and economics and understands the concept of cost-benefit analysis.

I have really seen the limits of that kind of thinking when it comes to school reform. I am trained in that way, but I really believe that it has caused a lot of the damage that we've done in public schools; it has been caused by that kind of thinking. This idea that everything is quantifiable and that cost-benefit thinking driving education policy just undermines the long-term vision to getting the work done and change.

Thomas asserted legislators and those involved in influencing and creating education policy view school reform from an economic standpoint, which is not appropriate for a humanistic system. As an expert in economics and public finance Thomas worked for a think tank that helped decentralize schools in a large urban city in the United States during the 1990s.

Thomas has served as an alternatively certified teacher and principal of two schools. His first principalship was at the first charter school (School #1) in his state—the result of a law he wrote which allowed charters to be established in the state; his second principalship was at Adams Academy. Thomas helped found both schools and referred to himself an “educational entrepreneur.” Thomas’ role as an educational entrepreneur is to start new schools and make them sustainable, “That work that I do is the start-up work, but then building an environment or a set of circumstances that can surround the school so that they can be successful over time.” Thomas admitted he was knowledgeable and

capable of starting schools, but had no knowledge of how to run the everyday operations of schools. Thomas quickly came to understand that starting a school and running a school required two different skillsets and knowledge bases. Thomas learned this after establishing School #1.

I was just nowhere near ready. There were no peer cohorts around. There was nobody around that had any idea of what it meant to run a small, autonomous, independent school. It was a huge struggle. It took me eight years to get this school upright when it should have taken maybe less than half of that time. There was so much trial and error in the early years.

Thomas' awareness that he did not know what he was doing as a campus leader when he was principal of School #1 allowed him to reflect on what worked well and what did not work well. He used this reflection and experience to prepare for the establishment of the next charter school—Adam's Academy and described the challenges he encountered.

We corrected a lot of things that we got wrong. We innovated in a lot of ways that we just weren't aware of and things that could be possible in the second school. It's an iterative process, but the improvement or the adaptation of the new model is leaps and bounds beyond what we had done initially.

In thinking about his experiences with traditional public schools, his philosophy of education, and conversation with industry leaders, Thomas stated Adam's Academy was different from a traditional school in that he and the current principal, Tanya, researched what the industry partners and students who were not successful in traditional schools wanted and considered what the construction industry would look like in the

future. In other words, he and the cofounder of Adams Academy envisioned the school with the end in mind.

When she and I [Tanya] created the school, the biggest difference between the creating of this school and a traditional school was that we started with a series of a long investigation of what our industry partners and our kids said they wanted. We really started with this vision about ten years from now, what is the industry going to look like? What are the skills and knowledge and attributes of people who are going to be successful in the industry later? We really had a good idea of what people were saying was the future and then started with that and then built-back from around from what a ten year vision of a graduate would be.

Thinking back on how he prepared himself to establish and open schools, Thomas considered his professional and personal experiences.

That experience I took to running a school and my finance background actually is a lot of the reason why the schools that were created are so healthy now because I understood the structural challenges of budgets and making sure that revenue was plentiful and that schools were sustainable over time. I read outside the discipline. It's other forms of literature that speak about what the industry is doing, the future economy, organizational development, things like that. I don't read much education literature because I just think that it's reinforcing the current frame, most of it is. I really think that being able to write about the work and then putting yourself in places where you can talk to people about it and describe it and invite them into the school and take them to visit With kids and understand it is a lot of the communications work.

Thomas provided press releases that spoke to the startup, focus, and graduation statistics of Adams Academy. Additionally, Thomas provided information regarding a technology summit in which industry leaders and educators collectively designed the coursework for the school. Last, Thomas provided website addresses in which I could find information about the industries in Alarcan, the school mission, how the school engages the community for funding, and links to articles about the construction industry's professional group. The evidence Thomas provided demonstrated a deliberate attempt to be different from a traditional school as evidenced by its focus on students—academic, social, and emotional; informing the public of the purpose, mission, and vision of the school; and demonstrating the collaborative partnership among the community, school, and construction industry.

#### **Participant 4: Tanya, The PYD Principal**

Tanya is the fourth participant, co-founder, and current principal of Adams Academy where Thomas (Participant #3) completed his last year as a principal. Students in 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade up to the age of 24 can enroll in Adams Academy. Students can attend school during the day or at night. Adams Academy is the first principalship for Tanya; she has experience in teaching and program development in traditional school settings.

Tanya states that who she is as an educator is who she is as a person.

... I'm very, very, very, very passionate about not making assumptions about kids and really appreciating who they are, and making sure they have access to things that will really help them reach their fullest potential. So, that's at the core. Access and opportunity is [sic] really important to me.



Tanya's description of herself was a direct reflection of her experiences in grade school as a student with a learning disability; she believes having a learning disability label prevented her from taking higher level courses in grade school. Tanya recalled one of the reasons she works in education—to make sure doors are not closed for other students as they were for her.

I knew I was going to be an educator since I was in fourth grade, and that just hasn't changed. It just really hasn't. There's other things I'm interested in, but in terms of what I wanted to do professionally, get up every morning and get paid to do, or retire doing, it was being in education. ...I had doors and opportunities closed for me by adults, assumptions that really were disappointing and I really didn't understand why that had happened and I didn't understand how someone could make that choice for me. So really remembering that experience and remembering that that happens to kids all the time for a lot of different reasons, I wanted to change that.

While Tanya did not take the traditional route of serving as an assistant principal before becoming a principal, she admitted she learned from other leaders by embracing their respective strengths of leadership. Even her certification route to the principalship was nontraditional in that she took:

18 hours or whatever, just enough to meet the licensure requirements.... But I was lucky enough to take those 18 hours with people who were really supportive of the kind of work, they knew the work that I was doing, and they were really supportive of that and the experiences that I had had, and that I was having currently, so they didn't expect me to back up into the box of what most of their other students were experiencing.

According to Tanya, Adams Academy is a nontraditional school. She described an environment in which formal titles between kids and adults are not necessarily relied upon to create a power structure. One staff member joked by saying that the kids call her “Mama Tanya”.

A non-traditional school is a school that first and foremost is built and led in a way that can be truly responsive in the moment and flexible in the moment to the youth that are in the building. ...we begin solely with relationships with kids. ...we have the space and time to do that. ...a lot of them don’t know that I’m the principal, which is the way I like it. They just know I’m another caring adult in the building...so that they can engage with me automatically and build a relationship with me automatically that would be stunted by that automatic perception of higher power or whatever in the work chart. ...It’s a low stakes opportunity to practice.

Additionally, Tanya named how they scheduled students in a nontraditional setting, “...scheduling by projects is totally different. Not grouping them by how many credits they have...we’re not going to lump you into a group based on some artificial label that we’re giving you.”

When asked what prepared her to facilitate this type of school improvement, Tanya stated that both her professional and personal experiences helped prepare her. Most importantly, she named her experience in traditional public schools that denied her access to upper level courses. Further, when she became a special education teacher, she encountered the same scenario with another student who was denied access to a course because of his learning disability. Not being able to take a foreign language course prevented him from going to a four

year university. Instead, he had to attend community college. This angered Tanya because, like her, another student was denied access to his dreams because of labels educators used in traditional public school to classify students—much to students’ detriment rather than working differently with students who require different learning supports.

It’s always a fine balance. Someone that says they want to be a doctor and has such a significant learning disability and emotional issues that they really couldn’t handle the pressure of that. That’s different than saying, “No you can’t be a doctor, you’re in special ed.” But looking at, well you want to help people; let’s look at all the opportunities there are and which best suits you for where you’re at and how you cope with things. That’s a different conversation.

The school improvement Tanya is facilitating is the staff addressing students’ needs from an assets based approach as well as addressing the whole child in order to help him/her be successful even when that means providing healthcare, housing, and emotional stability. The school improvement is ultimately establishing a culture. This type of culture, according to Tanya, is what makes Adams nontraditional. Tanya bases this view of truly educating the whole child on research which identifies students’ basic needs, as in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, being addressed so that they can be academically successful.

Well we know from schools that we’ve learned from around the country that you can’t ask kids to meet...high academic expectations if they don’t feel good. I know that if I’m not feeling good, I’m not going to be on my game. We know that there’s a lot of things that aren’t or can’t be provided outside the school, so we know we needed to provide that, and structure ourselves in a way that sustainably

can provide that. ...I see so much benefit to that, not just having a nurse, but...a clinic.

It's for their families, and it's for their own children, if they have children. We can do so much more preventative care. ...there's [sic] some crises that we can't prevent. We know that, we're not silly. But I think knowing that we can really provide a lot in the effort to give kids coping skills and resources to not get into crisis is huge.

Tanya provided artifacts that demonstrate communication to staff, school goals, and tenets of Positive Youth Development. Also, she recalled other anecdotes that demonstrated success for individual students. Finally, I was able to observe school in operation and speak to staff and students.

I think because we have kids that want to start here every day. I have a bunch of kids in the lottery that are waiting to get in. I have kids that are coming to the school. Parents are coming to the school. People are talking about it in the community at the family community level. I have staff that are, I think really happy to come to work and work their butts off. They have a hard job description.

#### **Participant 5: Brenda, The Servant Leader Principal**

Brenda is the current principal of Henderson High School Academy, a secondary public charter school in the southwest United States. Brenda is the fifth, and final, participant in the study. Henderson Academy serves students in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade up to the age of 24 who are interested in the health industry or who have not been successful in traditional public school. Henderson and Adams Academies are connected through a leadership of high schools network. Brenda has been at Henderson High School for five

months. Brenda sought a career in education because she feels “education has opened many doors for her.” She approaches education with a servant leadership style:

I feel that one of the things that we have to do in life is always pay back the favors or the good deeds that have been done upon us....One of the things God’s nuns told us is, “To those whom much is given, much is expected.” So it was firmly implanted in my brain since I was very young.

Brenda believes her religious beliefs and supportive family helped her be successful in her education career and considers herself to be lucky as she stated not everyone has had the opportunities she has. Brenda has over 15 years of experience as a principal and assistant principal in traditional public middle and high schools with the exception of this first year at Henderson Academy. Before becoming a principal, Brenda served in the classroom for 20 years. Brenda decided to become a principal as a result of inequities a student faced that administration did not address on the student’s behalf.

The only reason that I took leadership classes was because I disagreed with my principal on an issue about our students. I was the coach and one of my girls got hurt. The trainer refused to let her use the hot tub machine to help her heal because it was too late. He was tired. He didn’t want to do that. I complained and my principal said, “Well, he has to go home. So it doesn’t matter.” I’m not the assistant principal. He told me, “If you don’t like the decisions being made, then join us.” So I did.

Brenda took his advice and enrolled in a local principal preparation program. The focus of the principalship program that Brenda enrolled in was principal as a community leader, which worked well with her servant leadership approach to leading a school.

I always kept in mind that the job, the role of the principal is to serve the community, to serve the community of the school. ...I'm here to serve the students, to support the staff, to find ways of doing, to do a better job and serve a community, to really understand the needs of our community. That's what I'm all about.

Henderson High School Academy was founded on the principle of being a nontraditional school—a school for students who have not been successful in traditional public school and/or are interested in the health industry. Brenda described Henderson High School Academy as nontraditional in the sense that every assignment students work on is through Project Based Learning (PBL), and there are no structured periods throughout the day. Since the school places emphasis on the health industry, all PBL assignments are centered on the health industry and “learning happens in the community.” Secondly, Henderson is different from a traditional school in that students are provided with on-site wrap-around services. Third, the discipline management system is focused on students learning from and preventing negative behavior rather than adults punishing undesirable behavior.

Then, the difference between us and the other ... is that we serve those students who are not successful in a regular school....In my view, they're not difficult. They just haven't been successful. So, we work with, we support our students using the three pillar system, a strong curriculum is one of them. We're making sure the curriculum is, they have buy-in to the curriculum. The other one is also by supporting them and their mental health issues. We don't dis-involve kids for

bad behavior. We don't suspend kids. We have family meetings. We bring everybody together.

In order to prepare herself to facilitate establishing a culture, Brenda credited her preparation in her undergraduate and graduate programs as influencing the way she is developing culture at Henderson High School Academy. The active participation in class, collaborating with others, and learning one's strengths are what Brenda believes prepared her to lead a change in culture on her campus. Further, she attributed working in different cities, school districts, and types of schools as part of her preparation.

I learned about everybody brings something to the table. I learned about how to make the whole into smaller portions and work from a small place to the top instead of the whole and this is it.

Brenda's school improvement is improving the culture, more specifically, she is delivering professional development with the hopes of establishing a culture that does not default to punishing kids for misbehavior but one that understands the clientele with which they work and applies discipline strategies to teach self-responsibility and holds students responsible for their misbehavior. Brenda talked of changing the mentality of the teachers to move from discipline as punishment to discipline through identifying student assets.

This is our mission in the school is to work with them [students] and that nobody is perfect. There's going to be a lot of setbacks, but we will continue to work with them for as long as it takes, as long as they let us. So that's what we do. The culture of the school is that because we deal with difficult kids, and we can suspect sometimes that is taken as a weakness in part of the administration. ... We

never send a kid home for misbehavior. We have meetings. We have support meetings. We bring in the family. We do counseling. We talk to them. We bring the advisor in. We give second chances, third chances, fourth chances, so that the students can be successful and that is taken by teachers who are new to the school as being not supportive to them.

The school opened three years ago. Brenda is the second principal, so a culture of any type has not been established. In order to facilitate the school improvement that is necessary, Brenda provided professional development to the teachers of Henderson focused on the assets of students and addressed disciplining a student through positive statements and measures called Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD is an approach designed to help youth acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become healthy, productive adults; this approach prompts those who employ the strategies to view students as assets. The teachers did not see a value in PYD and preferred to work on planning for instruction:

Because we do this thing called Positive Youth Development, sometimes they say, “No, we don’t need to do that. I’d rather use this time to plan, to do more planning.” So, we’re working very hard as to giving our teachers the tools to use, positive youth support, and for them not to see it as a waste of time, but it’s a way of building relationships because our students need those relationships to move forward.

... We need to build those relationships and the truth is that those students that we still haven’t built those relationships, those are the students that we have problems with. Not until we find those relationships are we going to be able to



move forward with them. That is the cultural divide that we're having right now.

It's not so hard because teachers get it, but sometimes we forget and it's easy to move back, you know, suspend them.... That is the culture of the school.

Brenda did not provide any artifacts supporting the success of the professional development she delivered, designed to change the culture as she stated she would over the phone nor after the interview despite follow up requests. Through my observation and information obtained on the school's website, I could see a deliberate attempt to market the school to those who are interested in the health industry and to parents who want a different educational experience for their children as evidenced by the wrap-around services, curricular choices, focus on student development, and hands-on learning.

The principal profiles provide context and insight into who they are as individuals and leaders. The next section of Chapter 4 outlines the overarching and supporting themes so that the reader may see the principals as representing a perspective of facilitating school improvement that involved the process of unlearning.

### **Themes**

In this section of Chapter 4, I list and define the themes. A theme is a pattern of ideas that emerges after coding the data for each participant individually or for all participants as a group (Smith et al., 2013). More formally, Smith et al. (2013) define a theme as "a construct which usually applies to each participant within a corpus but which can be manifest in different ways within the cases" (pg. 166). When the principals spoke of their lived experiences, many commonalities became evident in each principal's experience both individually and as a group. As a result, four themes emerged from the data.

First, School Improvement versus School Reform emerged as a theme when four of the five principals talked about their respective school improvement initiatives.

Second, Leadership emerged as a theme; the principals talked about how they approach facilitating change that involves unlearning. Next, when discussing nontraditional and traditional schools, Flexibility emerged as a theme. Last, principals identified qualitative indicators rather than quantitative to define their success with facilitating school improvement involving unlearning. As a result, Other Measures of Success emerged as a theme.

The participants shared other unique lived experiences that were not captured in the themes. Although these anomalous experiences are representative of a single participant, some are significant and, therefore, reported in this chapter. Table 2 below outlines the themes of this study.

Table 2  
*Themes*

Theme Number	Themes
1	School Improvement versus School Reform
2	Leadership
3	Flexibility
4	Other Measures of Success

### **Theme 1: School Improvement versus School Reform**

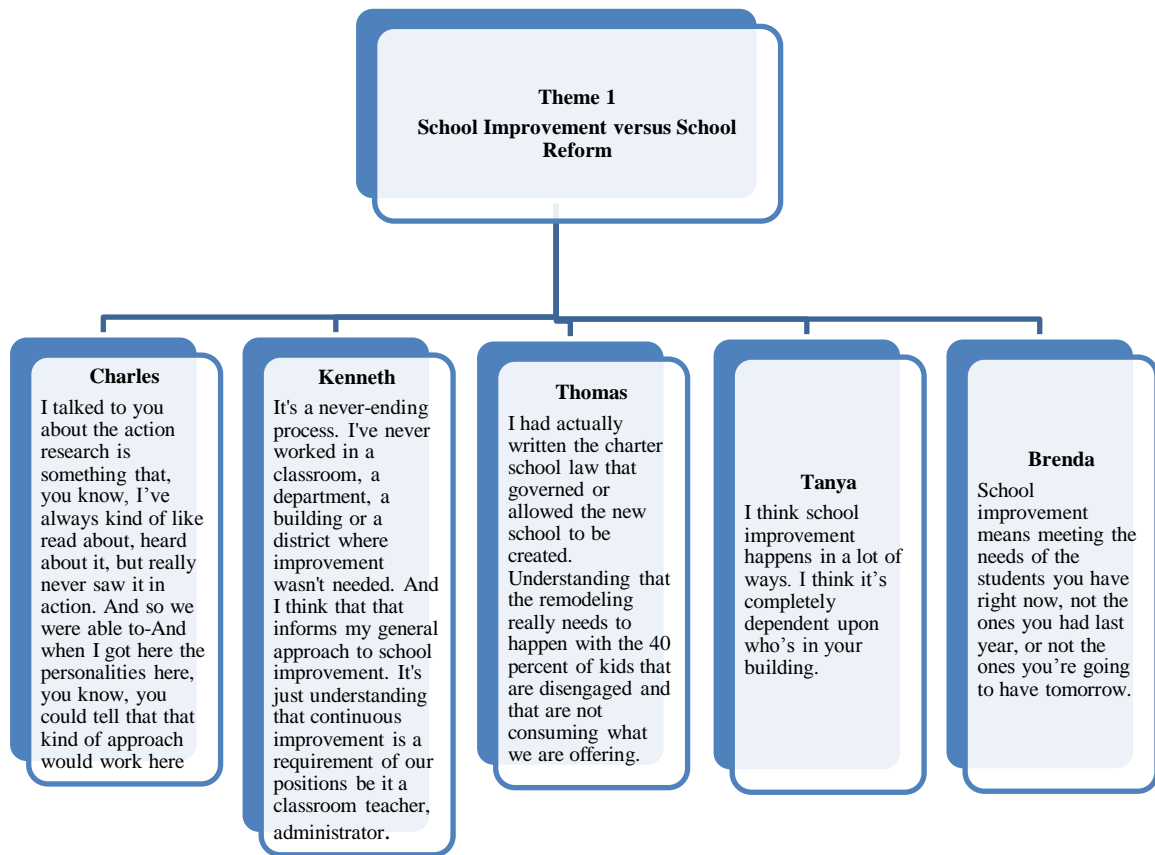
When I asked principals to describe school improvement, four of the five principals discussed differences between school reform and school improvement. The fifth principal shared the same description of school improvement as the others but did not attempt to differentiate school improvement and school reform. Because the

principals discussed the two philosophies throughout the interviews, school improvement and school reform emerged as themes.

The principals described school improvement as changes in existing structures that make them operate smoother and more efficiently. These are generally made in incremental steps (Ravitch, 2010). The principals noted school improvement is not an attempt to completely change a system or process but to improve it. Current research indicates school improvement occurs when the leader establishes a collaborative environment to achieve the mission and vision of the school (Harris, Day, Hopkins, Hadfield, Hargreaves, & Chapman, 2003). Due to the nature of today's schools, the principal alone cannot improve the school but must build capacity within those who work in the school.

School reform, on the other hand, is a redesign, re-conceptualized system or process of schooling that may not currently exist but is identified as being needed. School reform does not occur when the existing structures in a school remain the same; it involves changing the mental model from what currently exists and does not work (traditional school) to a new mental model (nontraditional school). Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) stated school reform should focus on improving all aspects of a school from leadership to parents and the community. These two philosophies of how to make schools better are what guided the principals' approach to improve their schools.

## Theme 1: School Improvement versus School Reform



*Figure 3. School Improvement versus School Reform. Participant views of Theme 1.*

**School improvement.** All principals considered their nontraditional schools to be a result of school reform because their schools were designed as alternatives to traditional public school. As a result of their schools being nontraditional, the principals considered the work they are currently facilitating as school improvement. When asked how he defines school improvement Charles stated:

For me school improvement is about developing the educators...it's about finding that problem of practice with any teacher and trying to deal with that...It's not like just settling for what we've always done....Jim Collins says, it's about getting the right people on the bus. I think it's really about making sure that you are

hiring on the front end and hiring well. It's not about hiring that master teacher from the start. It's about hiring somebody who has the passion, the energy and the intellectual capacity to really thrive. And so that's first and foremost my main priority.

When asked to define school improvement, Kenneth replied, "It's a never-ending process...And I think that that informs my general approach to school improvement. It's just understanding that continuous improvement is a requirement of our positions be it a classroom teacher, administrator...." In order to ensure Adam's Academy was different from traditional public school, Thomas made a clear distinction between school improvement and school reform. He wanted Adam's Academy to reflect a model of school reform and after established, school improvement to ensue in order to refine the systems and processes that were put in place as part of the reform efforts.

Well, I think there are two ways to think about school improvement. One is that there is the incremental work that needs to happen and that's about making better systems, improving the current model so that while kids are in school, they are having a better experience. They [students] may not have been consumers since they were in third grade, but that's why the dramatic change is needed to appeal to them...the reform movement really is about breaking down the mental model, deconstructing the mental model [of traditional school] that we currently have.

Tanya believes school improvement depends on the adults and students who make up the campus. School improvement, to her, includes the affective aspects of school environments—culture and emotional needs of students and staff.

School improvement is not necessarily something you're going to see in something standardized like a school report card. I think you can capture that stuff...but that doesn't really tell you whether the school's improving or not.

But I think when we're really talking about school improvement, we're talking about non-cognitive, we're talking about school culture, we're talking about professional culture, we're talking about really understanding our young human beings walking through the door, and helping them to grown [sic], and always....it's not just about them getting better academically.

Brenda saw being principal at Henderson High School Academy as an opportunity to serve the students and community. As principal, Brenda quickly learned she ultimately assumed the role leader of the community and school as well as the decision maker for the school; this was much different from her role in traditional public school. As Brenda navigates her way through her latest principalship appointment, she has had time to reflect on what school improvement means to her,

School improvement should be defined on the needs of the students because our student population is very different from one year to the other, even from one group to the other. School improvement means meeting the needs of the students you have right now, not the ones you had last year, or not the ones you're going to have tomorrow.

...being able to open doors for them, being able to find what they're strong on [sic] and work on their assets. Then after we find their assets, then use those to work on everything that is needed....but as a whole person and look at

him holistically. That's what true school improvement means, serving all students, even the most difficult ones, not just one type.

**School reform.** Thomas believes schools should be dynamic and relevant to kids and their local industries, further emphasizing the interdependent relationships of schools and their communities. Thomas is the only principal who actively engaged in school reform by designing and building a school while the others facilitated school improvement.

I had actually written the charter school law that governed or allowed the new school to be created understanding that the remodeling really needs to happen with the 40 percent of kids that are disengaged and that are not consuming what we are offering.

Further, as part of reformation, Thomas believes schools should be places of hands on learning, so he developed a partnership with the construction industry and established Project Based Learning (PBL) as the instructional practice. Thomas' approach to making school better was to completely reform it and make it relevant to students.

There is a whole other part about the reform or the improvement process which is the remodeling that needs to happen. You need to retain good systems and improve them in the existing model, but then you really need to remodel a lot of the work that's happening. You need to be able to hold both of those agendas at the same time. The remodeling work I think really is about understanding the distribution of kids from the highly engaged to the non-engaged.

They [students] should be able to demonstrate a set of interpersonal skills and discrete knowledge and they should be able to come together in successful

completion of projects where they're engaging in real life projects. That they are able to deploy those discrete skills, reading, math, computation, with a set of highly developed interpersonal skills so that they can work on a team and solve problems.

Tanya describes school reform as:

To me when I have always thought about school reform...I always think of innovation and school reform as synonymous, or interchangeable. So school reform, I used to think of as philosophy, and it's really doing something very, very different.

**Principal and staff beliefs—how they influence the facilitation of school**

**improvement/reform.** While facilitating school improvement, Charles believes personal accountability and responsibility drive differentiated professional development for his teachers; therefore, he employed a strategy that prompted individual teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses associated with delivering instruction through a process called action research.

So it's really about that and it [action research] empowers the teachers to work on what they deem is necessary rather than the principal saying, "I think you need to work on this."...This strategy is eye-opening because it's your information, it's your strategy...it's humbling, you know, because you can't say, well, they wanted me to work on this or no. You decided that.

As Charles worked to facilitate action research, he discovered the ways teachers believed, the resources they had, the mandates of the State regarding assessment, student experiences, parent



expectations, and his leadership qualities all influence the successful facilitation of school improvement.

Next, Tanya and Brenda's approach to school improvement focused on addressing teacher belief and actions. Jacobs (2003) noted that educators should understand how their personal beliefs and relationships with others influence their actions (Nelson & Guerra, 2014), which is why Tanya and Brenda are trying to improve their school culture by changing teacher mentality to see students as assets.

Tanya: Positive Youth Development is not being lenient and not having boundaries. It's the opposite of that. It's being a true model. This is what it looks like. If you mess up, this is what it looks like to make it right. It's a way of believing that children have assets, that they're experts in their own experiences, and you are there to help them reach their fullest potential as a mentor and as a model. Everybody's going to look different.

For traditional public school, generally speaking, school improvement means student performance on state assessments (Good & McCaslin, 2008). However, only two principals in this group referred to standardized testing as a measurement of student achievement. As Charles noted, "I think the success on like our state assessment speaks to improvements that are being made."

Kenneth added:

Well, there will a lot of matrices that I would use to define success. They are the traditional obviously here, we do have standardized testing. I won't lie, I'm gonna look at those results with a critical eye. If I see a diminishment in results from last year to this year, I will probably take that as a professional hit. We're doing some

brief in-house standardized testing three windows: fall, winter and spring. That will inform my feeling of success within the building.

Throughout the interview, Kenneth admitted that he has to change from traditional school mindset. Charles has been principal of Newman School for three years and still spoke of standardized testing as a major indicator of student achievement. Whereas Kenneth's school is in its fourth year of operation and Charles' school is in its 20<sup>th</sup> year of operation, perhaps standardized tests as the measure of student achievement and success is more engrained in Charles' school culture because it has been in existence longer than any of the other schools in the study. Tsang & Zahra (2008) stated the older an organization, the more difficult it can be to unlearn.

The principals believe there is a philosophical and action-oriented difference between school reform and school improvement. What informs them on how to facilitate both are their professional experiences and personal beliefs. All principals believe that addressing the adults' beliefs is the best way to successfully facilitate their respective school improvement/reform initiatives.

## **Theme 2: Leadership**

Leadership is the function of steering an organization to a desired place and is identified as one of the most important factors in the success of schools (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2007; The Wallace Foundation, 2007). Leadership is inclusive of what a leader believes, experiences that shape those beliefs, how the leader communicates with and relates to individuals in the organization, and the strategies a leader employs to improve/reform an organization (Conner, 2010; Cross, 2003; Jennings, 2012; Southerland, et al., 2007; Public Agenda, 2007). The second theme that emerged

was Leadership. As the principals talked about leadership, it was revealed that they played similar roles in their organizations, utilized similar methods of leadership, and exhibited similar characteristics of leadership. Additionally, each principal noted how their personal experiences influenced their leadership.

## Theme 2: Leadership

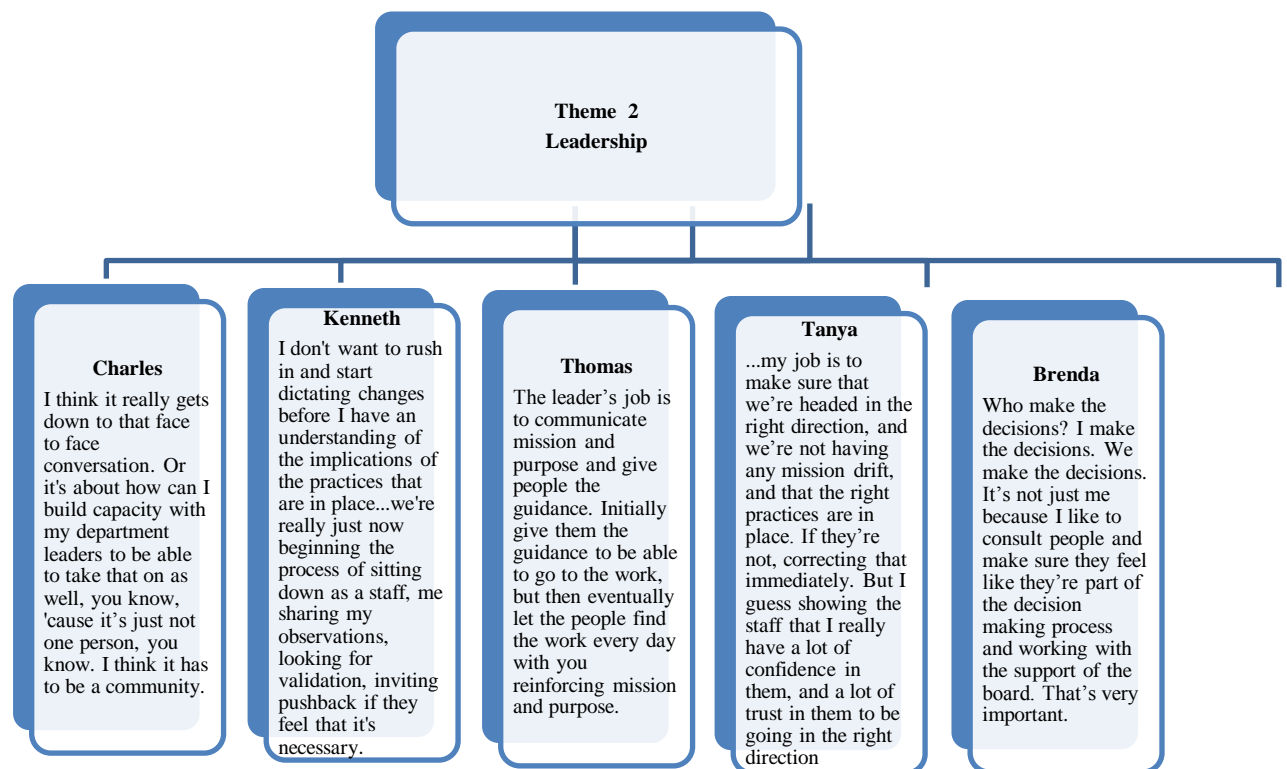


Figure 4. Leadership. Participant views of Theme 2.

**Role of principal.** The participants are in agreement that the principal role is multifaceted (Owens, 2004). For example, three of the principals have had to embrace their new roles as they facilitate their respective school improvement and reform initiatives. Kenneth described his multiple roles as principal of George Mason:

... I don't have an administrative team which means it falls to me from mowing the lawn on Saturdays to putting together the board packet and driving all the governance at the board level and everything in between, so it can be a little exhausting...

Brenda commented on her role with the school board:

...I like to consult people and make sure they feel like they're part of the decision making process and working with the support of the board....That's my new learning curve is learning about how to work in a new relationship with board members.

Tanya identified the principal's role as important to facilitating school improvement; she stated principals must be clear in their vision for the school. She suggested if a leader is not clear in communicating the ultimate goal and how to proceed, school improvement will not occur.

The role of the principal is to think, really support, create systems and structures, and hire people that are able to really know who it is they're working with, and what the situation really is. Then collaborate to move forward, and keep those opportunities available, keep the students moving towards those opportunities for them, keep those opportunities real, relevant, legitimate, not pie in the sky, not everybody does the same thing, not any of that, but really, what do these young people want to do.

Typically, a good leader, you're going to recognize the trends that need to be addressed. That's your improvement plan. Whatever that is, academics, social emotional, whatever it is, recognizing that having processes and structures in

place to allow for continuous addressing of that. Then the space to try things differently, really try to address and move forward. I think, in a general sense, that's really important. I think that the leader has to always be thinking and encouraging people, other people to think about what could be the answer, what could be the solution. Not what have other people done in the past...

**Ensuring the mission and vision are lived.** These individuals agreed the principal, as school leader, should be the one who ensures the vision and mission are known and worked towards. Brenda stated:

Every principal should want to get up in the morning, and come to work, and talk to kids, and talk to the senator, and talk to people, and talk about the school, and work with them to solve the needs of our students, the high poverty rates, the dysfunctional families, like the drugs in the house, all those things. Those issues are so hard to talk about, but we need to bring them to the table.

Additionally, Thomas noted:

I have a theory about that...Margaret Wheatley would argue that if you are clear about mission and purpose, people go to the work. That's really the leader's job. The leader's job is to communicate mission and purpose and give people the guidance...but then eventually let the people find the work every day with you reinforcing mission and purpose.

Tanya's idea of communicating vision and mission is in alignment with Thomas' and Kenneth's, "... that's what I'm supposed to be doing, is making sure that people really understand the mission and really understand what good practice looks like to reach that mission. "

Brenda and Thomas were the only two participants who referred to being involved in education beyond the campus itself; working with state level policy makers to improve schools is a role of leadership not often assumed by principals in traditional public schools level. The principals use the mission and vision of their schools to communicate purpose and to focus the learning and unlearning that need to occur in order for the school improvement/reform to be successful.

**Life and professional experiences that influence leadership.** The principals considered their experiences and the beliefs of their staffs in order to determine what leadership approach to take. Additionally, the principals identified leadership qualities they must possess in order to successfully facilitate the school improvement/reform initiative (The Wallace Foundation, 2009).

Kenneth stated:

The first and foremost thing in my mind is failure. I think the mistakes that I've made over the years, big and small, have been probably the best of preparatory elements for coming into this position....being able to reflect back on the 15 years that I put in, in a traditional setting...

Tanya added

...because that system [traditional public school] had deprived me, it underserved me because I didn't do things in the way that they wanted me to do, at the rate that they wanted me to do it....So I just vowed, "I am not going to do that..."

Brenda specifically spoke to her role in traditional school as principal as manager (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008), "... I've been an institutionalized puppy for 16

years.... We were taught to do and to just manage...” The principals spoke to having to actively “de-administrate” themselves from being leaders in traditional public school.

**Methods of leadership.** Bolman and Deal (2008) noted in order to facilitate unlearning, there must be an established culture of risk taking. The principals took a risk by leaving traditional public schools to become part of a nontraditional environment; additionally, they spoke about creating environments of safety so their staff can take risks.

When the principals first arrived at their respective campuses, first, they utilized observation as a method of leadership. Then, they began to make changes incrementally.

Charles said:

You know, as a new principal, my strategy is to come in listening rather than hitting the ground running and trying to change things. I think it was about trying to salvage what has worked for Newman School and encouraging people, putting people in the right place...

Brenda added:

So, a whole month of just being saturated with what the school is and how it runs. This month, slowly but surely, I’ve been stepping up and becoming more of a leader by leading activities and professional development, being the one that greets them at the door, talk to them, being seen more as the leader and not just the observer. It’s taken a while.

Further, she described how creating an inclusive environment is a successful method of leadership:

... what keeps me awake at night is making sure that I'm doing the right thing, that I look at all issues from every side, that I am inclusive, and I ask expert's opinions of what to do, that I bring the kids to the table so that they feel a part of the school, and just work day-in and day-out to provide those supports. That was a huge difference.

Next, Kenneth believed a principal needs to be able to adapt his/her leadership style to the faculty with whom the principal works. Kenneth adapted his approach to school improvement to one of collaboration based on the ability and needs of the staff. Additionally, he considered the structure, philosophy, and non-traditional status of George Mason School in selecting his approach. Kenneth shared a method to leadership:

...make sure you have staff buy-in...to that process throughout a given cycle...keeping an open mind that you may have to make midstream adjustments but at the same time making sure that the process remains in place and also the goals that you set out for yourself with the onset remain foremost in your thoughts as you go through that process.

**Leadership qualities and characteristics.** Acknowledging he is in the beginning stages of improving communication, there are particular leadership qualities and characteristics Kenneth identified as having helped him build relationships with the staff which have caused him to become a more reflective leader. First, Kenneth's approach to forming relationships with the staff involved observations and conversations to get to know each of them so that he could learn how to interact with them; these conversations and observations informed the ways he facilitates school improvement:



I can remember I've only got nine staff members. So it's easy for me to have those conversations and remember the takeaways. In the past, I've had 110 staff members, it would have never worked. And then I had a pretty informal process of having each one of them in this office at least for a few minutes on a weekly basis and going back and touching on those themes that arose on that first meeting. I try to ask them very open ended questions about my leadership. "How do you feel things are going?" "What can I do to support you better?" "Do you think our weekly staff meetings are fruitful?" I'm still worried that I'm not getting honest feedback. But I just keep that to the fact that it's still early days.

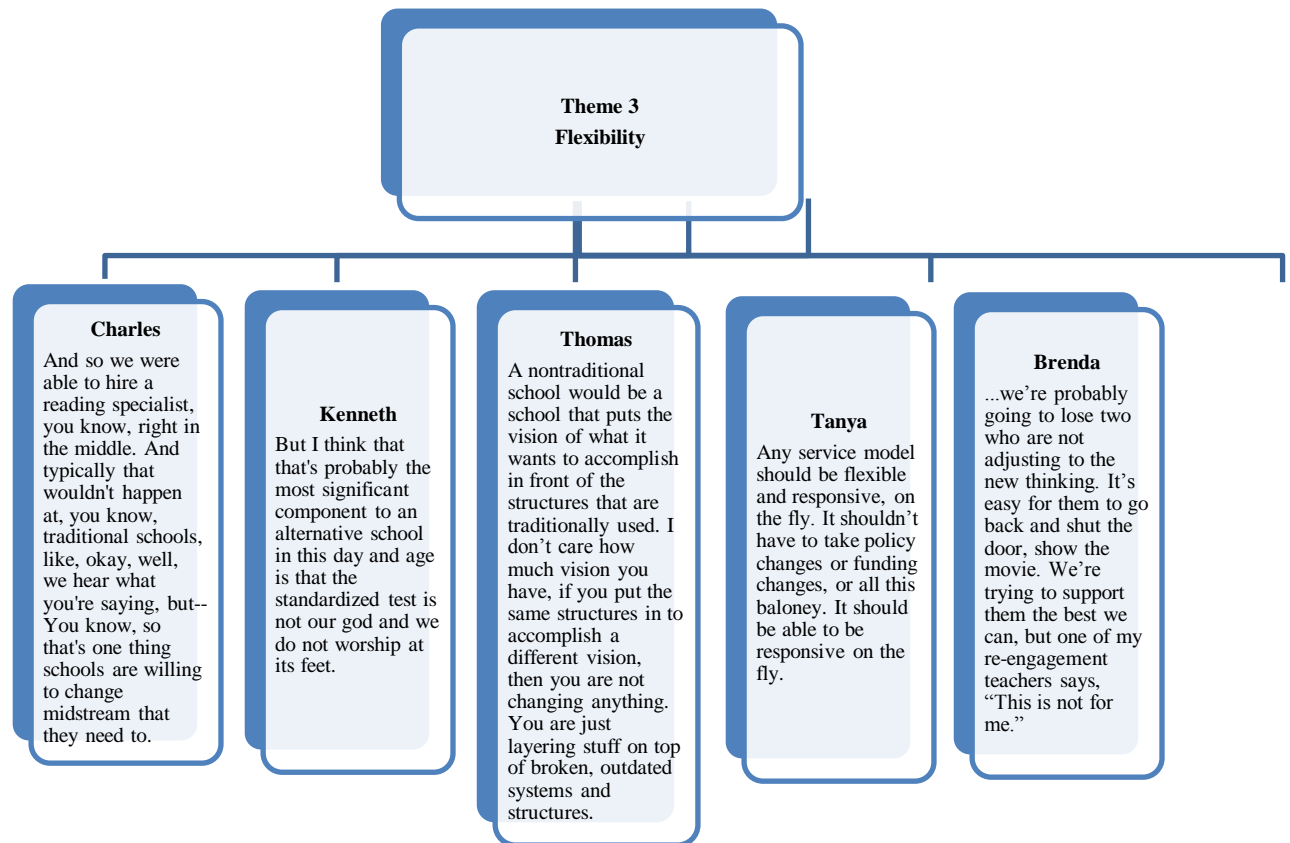
The principals identified particular methods and characteristics of leadership that helped them successfully facilitate the change they desired on their campuses. They identified open communication to develop trusting relationships with staff, communicating the vision and mission of the school, unlearning their previous methods of leadership learned in traditional public school settings, understanding leadership is situational and dependent upon context, and that changes needs to occur incrementally, but only after observation, as the primary methods that are helping them successfully facilitate school improvement and reform. Last, principals identified patience, reflection, and adaptability as characteristics conducive to effective leadership.

### **Theme 3: Flexibility**

When principals described differences between traditional and nontraditional schools, Flexibility emerged as a theme. The principals discussed opportunities they have gained by working in a nontraditional setting. The principals named being able to hire at any point during the school year, having local control over curriculum, and being able to

respond to environmental changes as some of the differentiators between traditional and nontraditional schools. When principals described traditional schools, they used language that reflected inflexibility.

### Theme 3: Flexibility



*Figure 5.* Flexibility. Participant views of Theme 3.

Principals in this study claimed their schools are nontraditional or are establishing nontraditional processes. All of the principals affirmed their schools are nontraditional, and they claimed they are establishing nontraditional structures and processes as their school improvement/reform. Table 2 outlines differences in traditional between nontraditional schools.

**Traditional schools.** When describing traditional and nontraditional schools, the principals often referred to traditional schools as schools with rigid hierarchical structures and systems. While working in traditional public schools, Brenda was not able to be a servant leader at the capacity for which she was trained. She commented on the hierarchical structure that maintains the traditional public school system as it currently exists.

One of the things that I noticed was that being a part of a big system like Alarcan Public Schools, you are just a middle-management person...as a principal, the only say you have is to say of the upper and if you disagree with them, you don't last long. So if you value your job and you like it, then you have to go with what upper-management says even though you might disagree with what they're telling you; you can't say anything. ... I see this [Henderson High School Academy] as an opportunity to really serve students, those students that I couldn't serve at the high school, at the middle school.

Second, traditional schools primarily measure student success via student performance on standardized tests (Good & McCaslin, 2008). Measuring student performance on standardized tests, according to the principals, prevents students from reaching their academic potential and discourages teachers from exploring alternative techniques for content and instruction. Three principals spoke passionately about standardized tests not being their only and leading approach to teaching, learning, and measuring student achievement. Kenneth noted, "But I think that that's probably the most significant component to an alternative school in this day and age is that the standardized test is not our god and we do not worship at its feet."

Last, the principals of the schools in this study serve two populations—students from middle to high socioeconomic households and students from low socioeconomic households. Tanya noted how stereotypes can adversely affect students. She asserted:

I know that they [students] are untapped innovators in our community. Because of the standardized traditional labels that they have fallen into, rightly so in some cases, not in all cases, but some labels are given because of our society in a way that we see a kid walking down the street with baggy pants and he's got color to his skin, we people slap a label on him.

Teachers at Henderson and Adams who decided to return to a traditional school setting found themselves out of place when asked to become a master at more than teaching.

Brenda stated:

He's [Marco] good at building relationships with the students. They [students] see him as a father figure, but he didn't want to be an advisor. In other words, "yes, I can tell you [students] that I do this this way, but I'm not going to deal with your [students] addiction. I'm not going to deal with your problems at home. You have to just listen to me and do what I tell you doesn't work for me".

Teacher #1 at Adams said:

Every day is a challenge. I've really grown as a teacher. ...I did not know how to build relationships with students, so I had to unlearn being a bureaucratic teacher to being more of an open teacher. I had to learn how to build relationships with students. For example, when I first came here, students rejected me outright. The students were like "this guy, man, he was just like is tightly wound". I was. That

was a big challenge for me. I had to really unlearn how to be a bureaucratic teacher and that was a good thing. Being a bureaucratic type teacher was like really beginning to stress me out.

Table 3  
*Characteristics of Traditional and Nontraditional Schools*

Traditional School	Nontraditional School
Teachers utilize prepackaged curriculum (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009)	Principals have re-conceptualized the school experience (Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012)
Instruction is standards/assessment driven (Good & McCaslin, 2008)	Instruction is focused on learning through experience, questioning, and social interaction (McWilliam, 2008)
Teachers only teach content specific courses and are sole sources of information (McWilliam, 2008)	School and learning can occur inside and outside of the school building with depth and breadth (McWilliam, 2008)
School occurs within four walls, dictated by a 45-60 minute class rotation	School staff and structures can quickly adapt to environmental changes (Senge, 1990)
Traditional structural and decision making hierarchy (Owens, 2004)	Teachers consider & include students as active participants when designing instruction (Public Agenda, 2007)
Technical responses become the solutions to increasing student achievement (Barry & Lechner, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; The Wallace Foundation, 2008)	Teachers serve as facilitators of learning (Preston, et al., 2012)

**Nontraditional schools.** A nontraditional school can be considered a school in which learning does not always occur within four walls, the students play an active role in their education, teachers serve as facilitators, instruction is interactive, and curricula are relevant. Thomas described the idea upon which he founded his nontraditional school, "... We really had a good idea of what people were saying was the future and then started

with that and then built back...from what a ten year vision of a graduate would be.”

Desiring to design something different for students for whom traditional school does not work, Thomas became inspired by local construction industry leaders and reflected upon the successes and failures of School #1, the first school he designed and built.

At Adam’s Academy, we took that experience from School #1 and rethought the systems and structures and philosophy of the school. We started from scratch with that client [kids who needed a new school experience] in mind and then built a school around that client, and School #1 was not built for that client. It was built for just a traditional student.

Referring to Adams Academy, Tanya stated, “Any service model should be flexible and responsive, on the fly. It shouldn’t have to take policy changes or funding changes, or all this baloney. It should be able to be responsive on the fly.”

Second, in traditional schools, teachers are taught to provide interventions and tutorials to address low academic performance rather than to look at school structures, curricula, instruction, beliefs, or policies (Ravitch, 2010), or even view students as assets for that matter. The principals of Henderson and Adams do just that—address the structure, curricula, beliefs, instruction, and policies because they have the flexibility to do so. Tanya pointed out:

The role of the principal is to think, really support, create systems and structures, and hire people that are able to really know who it is they’re working with and what the situation really is.

Tanya spoke of physical, instructional, and cultural attributes that make Adams Academy different from a traditional school. Building a culture of openness and

collaboration prevents working in isolation while sharing encourages them to take responsibility for all students, not just those on their roster.

I think the collaborative nature of our staff that the school building itself is built, such that we're never not in each other's space. So, if you need a private spot, you can take one, but the typical way of work is that we're all in it together. I think just our frameworks, PBL, Positive Youth Development and Project Based Learning and actually living that stuff and practicing it. That's what we do, from day one, from the moment we walk in the building until the moment we leave. Trust. A lot of trust in the kids, and a lot of trust in each other, that there's nothing we can't handle. We're in it together. That's different.

Next, Kenneth identified the way students feel about George Mason is nontraditional:

As they go home and they tell their parents, "It's not even like school." They say it's fun, but that the refrain I hear most often is "It's not like going to school." And I don't know if that probably folks out there who would think there was a negative feedback that it should feel like school and if it doesn't feel like school, something's wrong. But from my point of view, if it doesn't feel like school given where they've come from [traditional public school], then we're doing something right.

Additionally, Kenneth identified how students' varying needs are met as nontraditional because the school has the flexibility in structure and philosophy to do so.

The students have a great deal of freedom of movement within the building. We do a lot of individualization for students, both at the higher and lower end of the ability range across all the subjects. ... I think that fundamentally is the starkest

difference that a visitor would see when they're with us. Also, I think the dynamics within the building are nontraditional. We have an attitude of "Yes" as often as possible. We don't like to say no...[and George Mason] not dependent on standardized testing as a guidepost to instruction.

...the students need freedom of movement, they need self-direction, they need to have peer-to-peer instruction and we really need to allow them to set their individual and collective paces. All of those things were encountered to standardized testing approach, teaching to the tests as well as building an environment that is safe beyond fault...

Last, the principals remarked nontraditional schools are defined as those that have the flexibility and support from management to respond to environmental changes. Also, they noted nontraditional schools include those schools whose curricular choices and student learning opportunities are not driven by standardized tests. Last, the principals talked about nontraditional schools making a deliberate attempt to offer students and families options for education that are engaging, collaborative, and emphasize hands on learning. Thomas noted:

A non-traditional school would be a school that puts the vision of what it wants to accomplish in front of the structures that are traditionally used. If you go into a school and you see all of the structures, yet you have this vision that's not aligned with what those structures are, then you are looking at a traditional school.

The principals in this study all identified flexibility as an attractive attribute of seeking nontraditional school settings. Flexibility is what they identified most often as a contributing factor to their success—allowing them to develop the mission and vision in

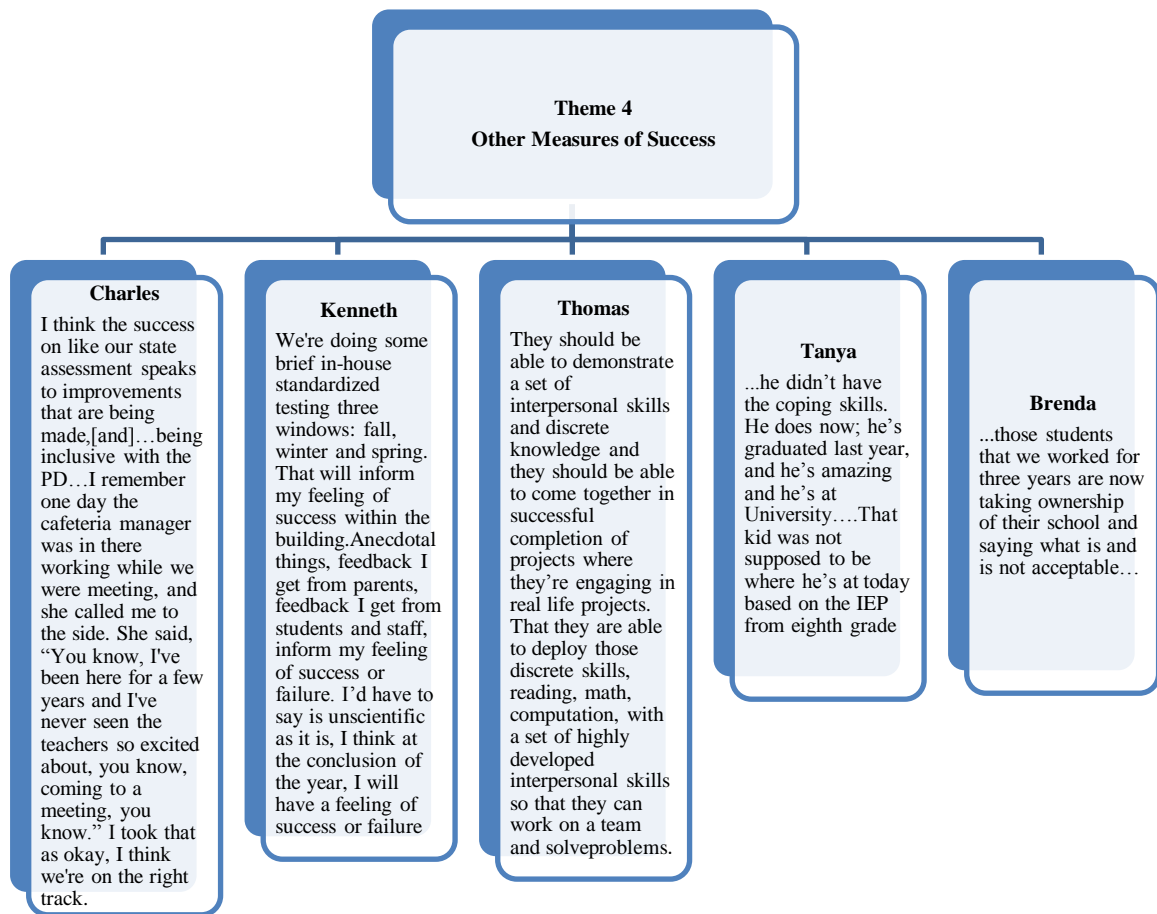


their respective schools. Flexibility served as a catalyst to innovation and opened the pathway for the unlearning process to unfold. Flexibility appeared as the most prominent feature between traditional and nontraditional schools.

#### **Theme 4: Other Measures of Success**

When principals talked about facilitating their respective school improvement/school reform initiatives, they noted qualitative data as more often indicative of success than quantitative data. Quantitative data are data that measure quantity rather than quality. Qualitative data are data that measure quality; these data are usually obtained from thick, rich descriptions of events (Bazeley, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2013).

#### Theme 4: Other Measures of Success



*Figure 6.* Other measures of success. Participant views of Theme 4.

Three of the five principals noted qualitative data as the primary way they measure success. A fourth principal noted a combination of the two while Charles emphasized quantitative data as his primary measurement of success:

I think the success on like our state assessment speaks to improvements that are being made, [and]...being inclusive with the PD...I remember one day the cafeteria manager was in there working while we were meeting, and she called me to the side. She said, “You know, I’ve been here for a few years and I’ve never

seen the teachers so excited about, you know, coming to a meeting, you know.” I took that as okay, I think we're on the right track.

When asked how he knew that founding the school, helping industry leaders define what school should look like, student learning is occurring, and providing avenues of sustainability were successful, Thomas identified quantitative measures—that the school is in its fourth year and is financially sound to sustain growth in the upcoming years. Next, he described the continued support from and engagement of the industry leaders who contribute to curriculum writing and serving on the committee that assesses student readiness for graduation as qualitative measures that demonstrate that industry leaders are committed to learning what schools could look like. Last, he described student success can be observed:

Through the exhibitions that the kids do at Capstone Exhibitions at graduation. They should be able to demonstrate a set of interpersonal skills and discrete knowledge, and they should be able to come together in successful completion of projects where they're engaging in real life projects. That they are able to deploy those discrete skills, reading, math, computation, with a set of highly developed interpersonal skills so that they can work on a team and solve problems. That's how you'll know... Yeah, if they [industry leaders] are agreeing with us that a kid's ready to graduate, that the experience that they witnessed in that senior, because they participate in the senior exhibitions, so if they are stepping forward and saying, 'Yes, that kid learned. That's a skill-set that we value,' then I know that it is validated by them.

When describing the success of establishing culture as the school improvement, Tanya recalled stories of students, who were discarded by traditional public education because of learning disabilities behavioral issues and academic issues, who have found success at Adams Academy. Tanya attributed the students' success to a change in environment where they are viewed as assets and are able to engage in real life situations. Second, addressing behavior at Adams Academy does not involve punitive administrative policies that typically consume administrators' time in traditional public schools. On the contrary as a preventive measure, the staff at Adams Academy teaches students responsible behavior as well as what responsibility looks like in various contexts. Tanya recalled:

The successes, I'll give you a few stories to give you a sense of what those look like. We had a student come in with a very extensive IEP, special education plan that had him segregated most of the time and had a lot of social work because he had some very significant physical outbursts. He had a lot of anger. He had watched his father be killed in front of him on their front porch. His mother was a drug user who was just trying to get things together. He'd been taken in by his uncle, and this is a middle school, young boy. This is a horrible time, and he's got Asperger's.

When he got here, just the nature of how we engage them, he's a whole different kid. We play sports on Wednesdays, and he didn't have the coping skills. He does now; he's graduated last year, and he's amazing and he's at University....That kid was not supposed to be where he's at today based on the IEP from eighth grade.

While changing the culture has presented challenges, Brenda stated that she could not measure if the professional development itself has been successful, so she defined success as:

So, for me, success at this moment, at this place, is providing professional development that is timely, that is useful for my teachers, and then seeing it applied at the classroom. Do I see it all the time? No. Do we get frustrated because of it? Yes, but I think of it as maybe we need more Kool-Aid. We need more work. You can't change a person's, a teacher's way of teaching in one professional development 45 minutes, even though you do it twice a week.

It takes more than that. So, for me success is those aha moments the teachers have or their staff has that say, "Oh, the students are doing a great job." Success was last Monday when we had an influx of new students because we had 15 come in, report cards, things. Everything that could happen that went wrong, did go wrong on Monday, and my Giovanni, our support staff, comes back from a meeting and all the students are in his office saying, "What are you going to do about these new students? They're cussing at our teachers? We can't afford that? We can't allow them to do that?"

That was a successful moment. Why? Because those students that we worked for three years are now taking ownership of their school and saying what is and is not acceptable...

The principals gave thick rich descriptions of experiences that defined success for them. The qualitative data reflected actions that could be performed, observed, and communicated through more than a standardized test or paper/pencil evaluations.

## **Conclusion**

The first theme that emerged was School Improvement versus School Reform. The principals spoke about the differences between the two philosophies. The principals noted people's beliefs and experiences influence how they facilitate school improvement and reform. Second, Leadership emerged as a theme; the principals talked about how they approach facilitating change that involves unlearning. The principals identified particular methods and characteristics of leadership that helped them successfully facilitate the change they desired on their campuses.

Third, when discussing nontraditional and traditional schools, Flexibility emerged as a theme. Flexibility was identified as the most evident characteristic that differentiated traditional and nontraditional schools. Last, principals identified qualitative indicators rather than quantitative to define their success with facilitating school improvement. As a result, Other Measures of Success emerged as a theme.

Chapter 5 includes an analysis of the data as it relates to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Additionally, Chapter 5 concludes with implications for practitioners, policy makers, and academia.

## **V. ANALYSIS & IMPLICATIONS**

Chapter 5 concludes the study with the implications of the findings. This qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study set out to understand if unlearning plays a role in school improvement by addressing the two research questions:

1. How do PK-12 principals understand the role of unlearning in school improvement?
2. How does a principal's awareness of unlearning influence his/her facilitation of the school improvement process?

School improvement and school reform have been attempted for years, but these improvement and reform efforts have focused mainly on technical aspects of schooling—academic interventions, improving test scores, allocating funds for program development, holding schools accountable by assigning school report cards, and requiring additional certifications of teachers (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008). The research notes these reform efforts have fallen short of improving schools nor have they resulted in increased student achievement between minority groups and their White counterparts as hoped (NCES, 2009).

Data for this study were collected from five principals of nontraditional schools who self-reportedly have or are successfully facilitating school improvement that involved the process of unlearning. The analysis of the data is framed around the themes, research questions, and theoretical framework. Additionally, Chapter 5 concludes with implications for practioners, policy makers, and academia.

## **How Do PK-12 Principals Understand the Role of Unlearning in School Improvement?**

First, the principals in this study seemed to understand the role of unlearning in school improvement to the extent they know it needs to happen for themselves and individuals associated with their schools. The principals understand changing mental models is what will move their schools forward (Senge, 2000). The literature supports the participants' claims that simply changing the structure of an existing traditional school setting does not yield school improvement or reform (Senge, 1990).

The principals made observations and conducted their own research in order to determine the focus of school improvement/reform. The literature identifies internal forces as the driver of individual unlearning while external forces drive organization unlearning (Tsang & Zhara, 2008). In the case of this study, dissatisfaction with traditional school sparked the establishment of nontraditional schools and processes while principals' school improvement initiatives served as the internal force that drove individual unlearning with the hopes of achieving organization unlearning. The principals first left traditional public schools for schools of choice in an attempt to work in organizations that most closely aligned with their philosophies of education. Once they landed in these schools of reform, they proceeded to work toward school improvement, acknowledging school improvement is about developing people from within (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Harris, A., et al., 2003; Owens, 2004). Each of their school improvement/reform initiatives focused on changing staff mentalities of what schools could be. Changing staff mentalities involved the process of unlearning, and once they began facilitating school improvement/reform, the principals understood very quickly



that getting individuals to unlearn was a challenge, as evidenced by the number of staff members who stayed at their campuses compared to the number of staff members who left.

Brenda: ...He [teacher] understood that teamwork was not for him... he didn't want to be an advisor. Our students have so many issues and some of our teachers don't have the, I don't know, the mental, the fortitude to deal with difficult issues. I understand. If you don't have the emotional fortitude to deal with hard times, then you shouldn't be here.... What keeps some of my teachers here, the ones that stay, the ones that are second year, one of them is young and the other one is almost ready to retire. They both stayed. I think what keeps them here, the young one, is the opportunity to do things differently. The older woman, is just her innate caring nature. She's willing to change to work here and she does. She has done that, but it's not been easy.

Second, when it came to organizational development, the principals seemed to understand unlearning must occur in order for their schools to improve. Three of the five principals attempted to improve their schools by addressing the social, emotional, academic, health, and behavioral needs of their students in an attempt to reform what traditional school should be. The principals addressed components of organizational development as they attempted to improve their organizations. Kenneth, Brenda, and Tanya knew that by addressing the structural, humanistic, economic, financial, and political factors that influence schools (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) they would be creating organizations that operated differently from traditional public schools.

Although some traditional school systems may address similar aspects of students' lives, it is the way the principals of Adams and Henderson Academies thought about and structured these services that made their approach nontraditional. The principals in this study saw serving students with health, social, and behavioral problems as an education issue, not a civil rights issue (Barry & Lechner, 1995). The principals of Adams and Henderson situated these services within their schools and addressed health, social, and behavioral education throughout the curriculum. Additionally, they utilized in-house services as both prevention and intervention. The idea that many students at their schools needed these services to accompany their academic development is a departure from the traditional school of thought. Three principals in this study accepted meeting the whole child as their responsibility while educators in typical traditional school settings hold the view that anything beyond academics is the students', parents', or social service workers' responsibility, not theirs. While many traditional schools provide social services to students and families, the principals in this study provide social services that extend beyond referrals to social service agencies; they provide these services as a part of the child's education, not separate, that addresses their families as well. Gay and Kirkland (2003) noted that historically educators have believed that teaching is solely a mastering of technical components, but all principals in this study believe the opposite. In this study, principals stated the teachers who chose to continue to work at their nontraditional schools were open to that change in mentality and did not believe their effectiveness was solely defined by masterful teaching, supporting the claim of traditional schools being inflexible and nonresponsive to environmental changes.

McWilliam (2008) noted the structures of schools perpetuate traditional ways of education, thereby, making them difficult to change.

Third, the participants' awareness of how organizations develop informed how the principals facilitated school improvement/reform that involved unlearning and how they understood what people must learn and unlearn based on their own organizational development experience in traditional schools. As Cegarra-Navarra & Dewhurst (2006) noted individual unlearning, management, and teamwork are significant influences in the learning process. The principals understood the role of unlearning in school improvement to the extent they knew it would need to occur in many of their staff members and to varying degrees. For example, understanding the role of unlearning in school improvement, the principals attempted to counter the process of unlearning by hiring teachers who already shared the school's philosophies of education. Willingness to learn is a contextual factor that affects unlearning (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Interestingly, while the principals spoke to the importance and role of unlearning, they attempted to facilitate unlearning through curricular and student behavioral modification and professional development, which are traditional approaches to change in school. The participants did not speak to facilitating professional development that prompted staff to reflect from within to understand how their beliefs, behaviors, and experiences contribute to their current mentality of school or their abilities to learn and unlearn. For example, the principals at Adams and Henderson tried to adopt the concepts and practices of Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) to get teachers to change their minds about how to educate and interact with kids. The

concept of PYD is to view students as assets as well as to promote youth to develop their own assets (Lerner, Almergi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). At a greater depth, the concept of PYD attempts to engage young people within their communities and families. The theory itself is an attempt to “replace long-held beliefs of the inevitable so-called storm and stress of adolescents....” (Lerner, Almergi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005, p.10). This particular school improvement initiative prompted adults to challenge their beliefs about young people, but the principals in this study did not appear to facilitate the implementation of PYD by directly addressing teacher beliefs. This is in contrast to research that suggests not only must the teachers’ beliefs be acknowledged, understood, and unlearned, the principals themselves had to address their own beliefs that contributed to the way they view the school (Baskerville, 2009; Knoblauch and Hoy, 2008; & Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Next, according to Jacobs (2003), when educators decide if they want to work toward school reform or school improvement, they should understand how their personal beliefs about relationships with others influence their actions, as technical school reform efforts alone have not resulted in substantial school improvement (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2002; Cuban, 2008; Goodlad, 2004; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Takona, 2012). Change is a process that connotes the way individuals behave or the manner in which individuals’ beliefs need to be replaced with better alternatives (Low, 2011). The principals in the study suggested that, depending upon the context and how and what the individual believes, change can be rejected or welcomed (Center for Creative Living, 2004; Training & Development, 1994). The principals understood the context in which they set up staff to learn and unlearn was crucial to being

successful. To their advantage, the ages of their organizations indicated a better chance of unlearning occurring than if their organizations were older (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009; Tsang & Zhara, 2008).

Research indicates if change is seen as a threat to a way of thinking or believing, individuals are likely to resist the change; however, if change is viewed as an opportunity for growth, individuals are more likely to be receptive of the idea (Mieres, Sanchez & Vijande, 2012; Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009). Nonetheless, individuals can choose to not unlearn beliefs and behaviors. Teachers at Adams and Henderson Academies who wanted structure returned to a traditional school setting. In the case of the teachers who left, the principals noted they could not make sense of the unlearning that needed to occur and reverted to traditional ways of knowing and teaching. Research indicates prior knowledge and beliefs are familiar to people. Because of this, it is difficult for people to accept another way of knowing and doing that questions what they have one has believed to be always be true (Causey, et al., 2000; Nespor, 2006; Streets, 2011; Ward & Ward, 2003).

The factors that appeared to prevent unlearning from occurring were beliefs and experiences in traditional education, which were deeply engrained and framed what education should look and sound like. Because these individuals were not receptive to change, they could have contributed to the stagnation of the organization (Low, 2011). Mieres, Sanchez, and Vijande (2012) note that when only a few individuals change, organization unlearning does not occur. Brenda talked about losing two teachers this school year for different reasons. When discussing what made some teachers stay and

others leave, Brenda and Thomas implied those who cannot change their mental models are the ones who leave:

Brenda said:

I think Sharon was telling me that out of the six teachers they had last year, only two came back and they had to rehire new teachers. Of the teachers who are here, we're probably going to lose two who are not adjusting to the new think. It's easy for them to go back and shut the door, show the movie.

Thomas noted:

People [teachers] left. They just said, 'This isn't for me. I don't know what's going on here. I am uncomfortable with it. It doesn't make sense to me. I don't agree with it.' So, people left when they couldn't reconcile that... There's just a ton of ambiguity and it's uncomfortable for people.

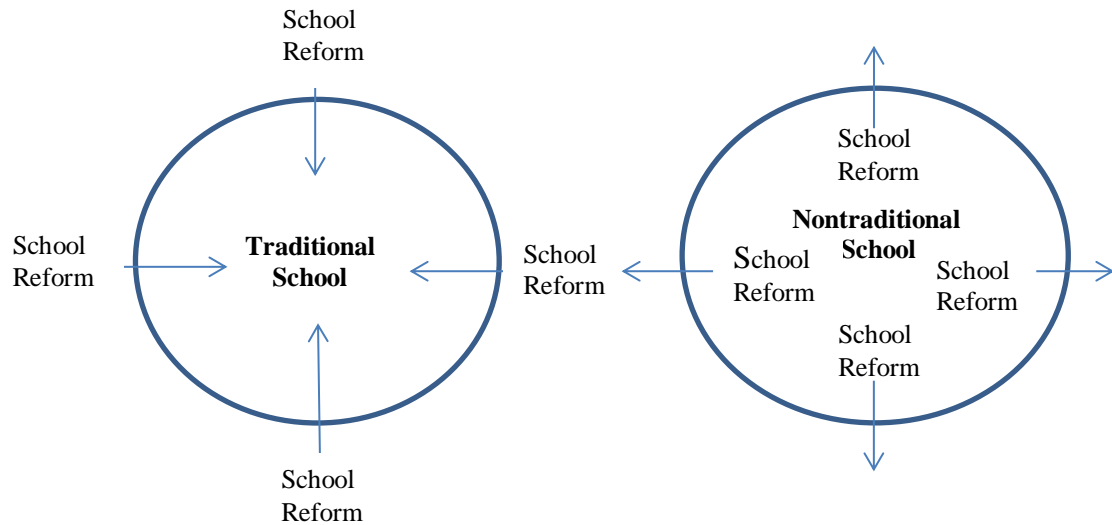
Srithika and Sangharmitra (2009) note the mindset of individuals is the biggest roadblock to unlearning along with what Lei et al. (1999) identify as rigid organization boundaries and politics as being impediments to change. As Ravitch (2010) noted, identifying how experiences, beliefs, and practices converge or diverge with one another will help educators get at the root of improving schools. For the leaders themselves, their beliefs about school and what school should look like are shaped by personal experiences (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Knoblauch & Hoy, 2007; Lee, 2010; Milner, 2005; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Nespor, 2006) and those personal experiences become knowledge and inform their practices (Causey, et al, 2000; Streets, 2011). Brenda credited her experience as a coach to being able to facilitate unlearning. Brenda knew from her coaching experience that changing behavior involves incremental change. Since Brenda was

recently appointed principal of Henderson High School Academy, she admitted that she is unlearning as well, probably just as much as the staff, because they all come from traditional public schools.

...It's all about unlearning old habits and picking up new ones. I'm a coach. ... I know that bad habits are hard to break, but the only way to break something that's not making you successful is by replacing it with something that will make you successful. That's the only way you're going to change behavior. ... This school was built for different students and it's going to work differently.

Last, the principals used the mission and vision as reminders of purpose when unlearning became challenging for the staff. They utilized the mission and vision of their schools as a guide and checkpoint of their processes for school improvement/reform. They became designers of their own school improvement and reform initiatives rather than looking to prepackaged programs to improve and reform their schools as this suggests that school improvement and school reform occurs most effectively from inside the organization rather than outside of the organization.

## School Reform Efforts of Traditional and Nontraditional Schools



*Figure 7. School Reform Efforts of Traditional and Nontraditional Schools.* This figure represents how the principals identified the origination of school reform for traditional and nontraditional schools.

Figure 7 is a representation of how traditional schools have historically engaged in school reform and how the principals of nontraditional schools in this study engage in school reform. With change occurring from the inside out, the principals suggested people are the agents of change that improve the organization and not the other way around—organizations improving people. The nontraditional school diagram represents the notion that school reform starts from the people within the organization further supporting human capital as most important for organization development (Owens, 2004). The traditional school diagram demonstrates that school reform comes from external resources such as those from the Comprehensive School Reform bank of programs and that those on the inside are to make the program successful—suggesting little responsibility on the behalf of those implementing the reform. The current federal and state policies of school reform is an extension of the 1990 frame of thought that promoted



a market based approach to reforming schools (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). While at the same time purporting to help schools by creating the CSR, government policy promoted reform through the opportunity of school choice via the creation of charter schools—suggesting that the current system is not conducive to reform.

In 1998, the CSR program was created to assist schools in implementing scientifically based research (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Initiative, 2007). Historically, school reform has been a set of externally created and imposed programs designed to increase student achievement on standardized tests. Each of the principals elected to stay away from prepackaged programs designed to improve schools. Instead, the principals opted for initiatives that improve teachers' craft, student learning, and their environments. The principals chose to work from within in order to make their schools better. Based on the data from this study, school improvement and school reform are defined differently and require different actions. Identifying school improvement as something they do every day; the principals imply school improvement is ever changing and contextual whereas school reform is a much larger, complex act that requires innovation—innovation away from a traditional school. The principals defined school improvement and reform as each concept related to them and the contexts in which they work.

Senge (1990) noted exploring oneself to affect change in the organization is required because people change, not organizations. This further suggests unlearning needs to occur before learning occurs (McGill & Slocum, Jr., 1993). According to Srithika and Sanghamitra (2009), unlearning and learning are two different processes, requiring two different sets of action. The principals in this study recognized many of

their teachers needed to unlearn in order to learn new beliefs and behaviors and that the role of unlearning is critical to successfully facilitating school improvement.

### **How Does Awareness of Unlearning Influence the Facilitation of School Improvement?**

Researchers have identified unlearning as a reason some organizations learn and progress and others do not (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) establishing a relationship between the learning and unlearning. Hedberg (1981) defined unlearning as “a process through which learners discard knowledge...and make way for new responses and mental maps” (p. 18). Learning is defined as “a process of acknowledging our actions, reflecting on those actions, deciding how to change our next action, and apply that decision to another action” (Senge, 2000, p. 93). Unlearning is the part of learning in which individuals decide to change and modify their actions.

First, the principals established conditions to make the unlearning successful. As management, the teachers in their schools have support from top down. Since the teachers are the ones unlearning, the principals, as management, need their support to switch the dynamic of how change occurs. The teachers essentially hold the power over the school improvement being successful, which is what Mary Parker Follett identified as the key to management—those who are lowest on the hierarchy (Owens, 2004) should have the power to make change. A culture of openness is another way the principals attempted to make the unlearning process easier. Structurally Tanya created a shared space among the teachers and staff, hoping to build a bond so that they all can live out the mission and vision of the school: Our colleagues are pretty good about advocating for

each other. “You know, you might check in with So-and-So. They’re looking really stressed.”...But watching them [staff], most of my direction comes from watching what they’re doing, and listening to what they’re talking about and how they’re talking about things. Then I know we need to go back and revisit this.” When a culture of openness is established, the capacity for unlearning increases (Mieres, Sanchez & Vijande, 2012).

Next, facilitating a culture requires a mission and vision to be developed and lived. All of the principals’ school improvement/reform initiatives suggest that a strong mission and vision need to be developed in order to really be nontraditional. When employees collectively live the mission and vision and the change that is being suggested is in alignment with that mission and vision, but requires a different way of operating, the chances of unlearning are greater in those environments in which the vision and mission are not developed or adhered to.

Third, each of the principals indicated they attempted to establish relationships of trust so teachers would feel comfortable taking risks. Risk taking is essential to change (McWilliam, 2008). Each of the principals encouraged staff to take risks to make their schools different and better for students. The principals engaged in conversation to get to know teachers so they would feel comfortable with engaging in open, honest communication. Kenneth knew if teachers were not comfortable with him as the leader, they would not be willing to take risks, thereby, lessening the likelihood that the school improvement would be successful. Kenneth’s awareness that establishing relationships through communication was essential to unlearning occurring, contributed greatly to his success.

The very first thing I did in the week I started was invite them all in individually and we had just a get-to-know-you conversation. I started out with a numerous deliberative questions about what kind of leadership do you think you work best under...So a series of set questions that helped me understand their mentality, how they approach their work.

Fourth, one of the most influential conditions of change is whether a person is willing to unlearn and learn (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009). When people are willing to engage in something, it makes it easier for people to consider change, and leaders to facilitate it. This can lessen the depth at which some people may have to unlearn. When people are comfortable with making mistakes, they are more likely to explore the possibilities that come with change. Charles noted that, “It’s really about building them up as much as possible; it’s about creating an environment where people feel as though they can make mistakes and [if] they don’t get the results they want, ... [the] principal’s not coming down on them.”

Tanya said:

You gotta be able to keep it wide open for them [staff] to engage, and then they’ve experienced that, so they can open it for kids. Then the kids can experience that, and then it just is going to pay it forward....So that takes some getting used to. I think otherwise it’s just beautiful. It’s beautiful.

The principals set up structures to facilitate the unlearning that would make the school improvement successful.

Additionally, Tanya and Brenda made deliberate attempts to hire teachers who already possessed the same philosophy of the school. Their awareness of the challenges

that unlearning presented afforded them the opportunity to potentially lessen the amount, and depth of unlearning and learning that needed to occur. Teacher beliefs in the United States are generally developed around the Western White male middle class culture that is historically known to marginalize those who do not fit that description (Brock, Moore, & Parks, 2007; Causey, et al, 2000; Lee, 2010). Educators who have adopted this perspective view students from marginalized groups as liabilities rather than as assets (Milner, 2005). Brenda even suggested they start their own teacher preparation program for the schools they are leading to facilitate the unlearning process.

Next, the principals used the traditional school as the model to be unlearned. Their decisions and actions to facilitate unlearning are compared to what traditional schools are. Because the principals have experienced what traditional public schools require of their teachers and administrators, they are able to decide which school improvement initiatives may require unlearning. They anticipate that since most teachers will come from a traditional school background some unlearning will need to occur. The principals provided professional development to counteract traditional ways in order to move forward to nontraditional ways of teaching and learning.

Further, in order to facilitate unlearning, teachers must trust their principals and colleagues. Principals understand an important component of organizational development is communication. In order to facilitate school improvement, the principals created structures and processes that are in alignment with the vision and mission of the school. For example, in order to view students as assets, the staff's language and actions needed to change. In order to create a culture of collaboration, the principals involved their staffs

in decision making—all contributing to the effectiveness of shared communication. Open communication allows relationships of trust to develop (Lei et al., 1999).

Last, the principals understood their roles as leaders when facilitating school improvement that involved unlearning. Kenneth and Brenda made sure they constantly checked themselves so they did not revert back to traditional ways of leading, teaching, and learning (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009). They looked to the mission and vision of the school as reminders of why they chose their schools, which was to provide different opportunities for students that they have not received in traditional schools. They understood constant self-reflection, on the part of both teachers and themselves, was what would keep them progressive (Causey, et al., 2000). Principals understood they are a work in progress and publicly share their own learning and unlearning with the staff (Gay, 2010). By making their unlearning public, they hoped to create environments of comfort for teachers to do the same.

Each of the principals were new to their campuses—less than one year—except Charles who has been at his campus for three years. The participants' lived experiences were triangulated against researcher-identified artifacts, staff and student oral reports, and participant provided artifacts to allow for multiple ways to support trustworthiness. The consistency of principals' claims demonstrated through the different types of artifacts, oral accounts from both students and teachers, and researcher observation and analysis of data allowed for the level of trustworthiness of principal claims to be identified. The principals understood, due to the amount of time they have worked in their positions, they need to establish culture (Center for Creative Leadership, 2004). In order to establish culture, they recognize, since most of their teachers come from traditional public schools,

they had inherited employees who worked under the previous model, and that a culture relative to the mission and vision of the school needed to be developed. Tsang and Zhara (2008) noted, the younger the organization, the greater the chance of unlearning occurring because beliefs, routines, and traditions may not have been established. Thomas reflected this when he said, “It is in the formative years when you don’t have culture that people leave and that’s because you don’t have enough culture there for people to adapt.”

When a solid culture is established, it results in teacher and student growth. When everyone works in alignment, the principals understood that organizational, rather than individual, unlearning could occur. The principals tried to establish culture as a means of changing beliefs and practices by providing space and opportunity for staff to unlearn.

When unlearning needs to occur, the literature identifies factors and conditions in which unlearning can be successful. Organization leaders should:

- 1) determine if the unlearning that is necessary is individual, group, or organizational (Akgun et al., 2007);
- 2) identify individuals who are motivated to learn (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Tsang & Zahra, 2008); this increases the potential for unlearning to occur;
- 3) set the context for unlearning (Srithika & Sanghamitra, 2009) to occur by:
  - a. identifying external and internal factors affect unlearning (Morgan, 1998; Training and Development, 1994; Tsang, 2008)

- b. identifying how space, time, security, age and size of organization, and organization environmental factors may affect unlearning (Akgun et al., 2008; Becker, 2010; Tsang & Zhara, 2008);
- 4) establish effective communication channels and prevent reversion to old behaviors by establishing an organization-wide commitment to the mission and vision that support the unlearning (Mieres, Sanchez, & Vijande, 2012); and
- 5) establish a culture of risk taking to promote unlearning (McWilliam, 2008; Public Agenda, 2007).

All of these conditions can be set up in a traditional school; however, the structure of traditional schools, by design, makes it difficult for unlearning to occur.

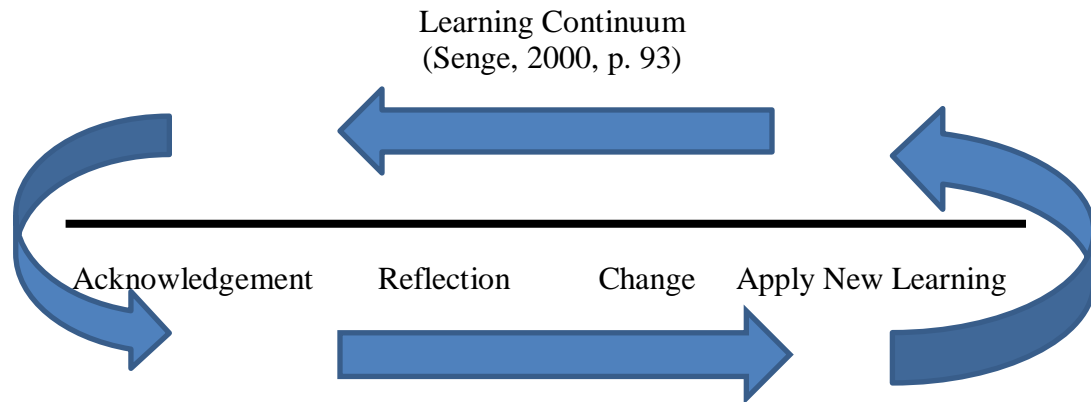
The principals' awareness of the role of unlearning presented unique opportunities for them to facilitate the school improvement process and achieved greater results than technical interventions alone (Sergiovanni, 2000). The part of learning that is often overlooked is unlearning; it tends to be an invisible barrier to learning. In attempts to facilitate change quickly, those who facilitate change may overlook the mental process that it takes to unlearn adverse behaviors, beliefs, and actions. Unlearning is a challenging process. It requires individuals to look within to somewhat critique the way they believe and behave (Gay, 2009; Milner, 2005). The nature of unlearning is an intimate, individual process that makes it a challenge to measure and monitor its progress and results (which is why most of the principals' indicators of success are qualitative) as well as to identify professional development to engage in in the field of education.



## Themes as They Relate to Unlearning on Senge's Learning Continuum

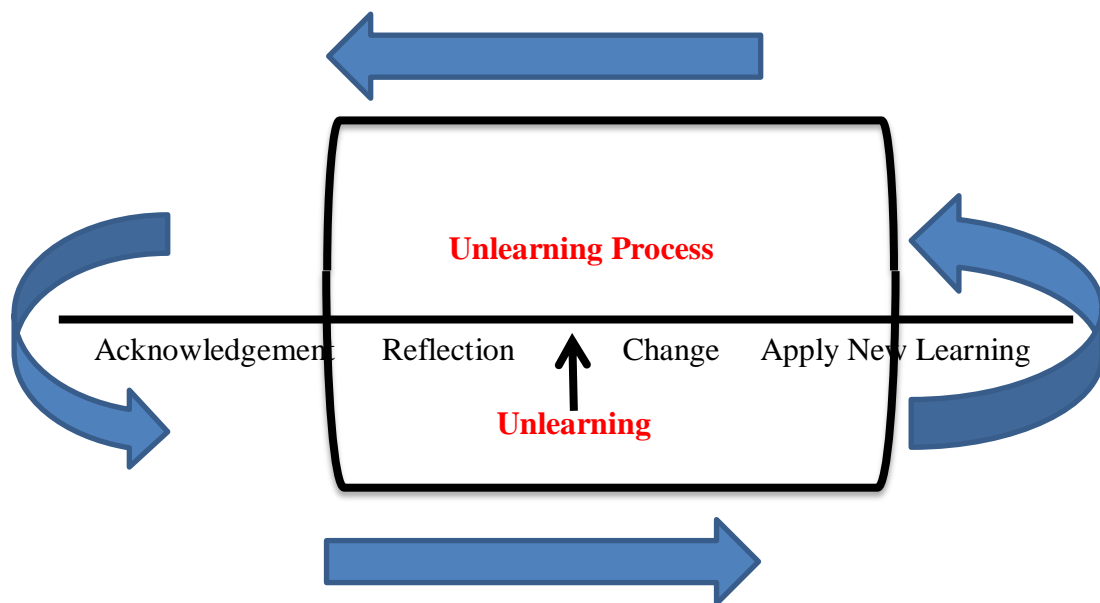
Senge developed a learning continuum that includes the different stages of the learning process. Research suggests that unlearning is a part of the learning process (Cegarra-Navarro & Dewhurst, 2006).

### Learning Continuum



*Figure 8.* Learning Continuum. Illustration of Senge's description of the learning continuum.

## Unlearning on the Learning Continuum



*Figure 9.* Unlearning on the Learning Continuum. The unlearning process is illustrated on the learning continuum. This illustration depicts unlearning as a separate act and a process that is part of learning; the continuum is built from the description of learning by Senge (2000, pg. 93).

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the relationship between learning and unlearning. The figure further illustrates that learning is a continuous cycle and can occur without unlearning but only if the new learning is introduced for the first time. However, unlearning cannot occur without learning as new beliefs, behaviors, and actions replace old, out dated ones (Hedberg, 1981; Shiu & Chan, 2006). The principals in this study identified when they are aware that unlearning needs to occur, it influences how they facilitate school improvement.

For Theme 1, the principals made a distinction between school improvement and school reform. They stated school reform requires a change in thought process. If the principals were to place the unlearning process on Senge's learning continuum, unlearning would take place between reflection and change because in order to reform

schools, according to the principals in this study, individuals have to reorient the way school is conducted; more specifically, individuals have to break the mental model of traditional school which means to unlearn and change the way we approach school reform and school improvement. Leadership and unlearning research (Gay, 2009; Milner, 2005; Senge, 2000) identify reflection as an important component to growth; however, the research does not address what happens between reflection and when individuals choose to change; this is what the study attempts to understand, what happens during that period of dissonance when existing beliefs collide with the introduction of new information. The principals' experiences with school improvement/reform in the traditional school setting met opposition with their own beliefs about what school improvement/reform should look like. School improvement and school reform are relative to the unlearning on the learning continuum diagram because the principals noted that they had to unlearn "a lot of what is done in traditional schools" in order to reform schools because they have to be different than what has already been tried and what is currently not working. Identifying and applying social, emotional, behavioral, and academic philosophies that support children and their families at the school site was a change in mental model of what schools are responsible for and a change in behavior of who should provide for those responsibilities.

Second, the theme of leadership connects at several different levels on the learning/unlearning continuum in that the principals themselves had to engage in individual unlearning in order to effectively facilitate organizational unlearning. The principals reflected on their leadership practices and experiences with traditional school, and once they encountered other possibilities for education, opted for something

different. In order to change and apply new philosophies of teaching, learning, and leading, they each worked to “detraditionalize” their leadership approaches to improving school, which was generally framed by a deficit approach to leadership. Also, it was important to them to have undergone the process of unlearning and to understand it so that they can better facilitate unlearning for the staff who experienced many of the same struggles they encountered when changing their own mental models and behaviors.

Third, reflection and change on the learning/unlearning continuum suggest flexibility in thought as a characteristic that allows opportunity for unlearning to occur. Mental flexibility is important because unlearning involves changing the mindset. The principals noted being flexible in their thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs in order to elicit and sustain change and apply the new learning is important. The flexibility in thought generally indicated a willingness to change.

Last, unlearning is a qualitative process that is difficult to measure. Unlearning does not allow for causal relationships between unlearning and success to be identified. The principals often cited qualitative data as their leading measure of success. One cannot quantify reflection, change in mental model, or application of new learning; however, one can attempt to understand the extent and depth of reflection and change in mental model as well as the quality of applying new learning. Measuring aspects of school improvement that are not easily quantifiable makes unlearning a less desirable approach to improving/reforming schools because numerical data cannot be attached to it and it takes time. Although unlearning may be an undesirable approach to school improvement/reform, it may very well be the humanistic response that is necessary for schools to improve. Looking at qualitative data and figuring out a way to have school

districts acknowledge and communicate qualitative data in a way that supports successes being celebrated.

This research study is an entry point to a conversation and is more research on unlearning in an educational context. I attempted to understand school improvement/reform from a nontechnical lens to a humanistic one. Unlearning allows for reflection and change to take a deeper, richer approach to change and applying new learning. What this study does is takes principals who have worked in traditional schools for many years who opted for something different which involved their own personal unlearning and trying to reform education and those working in education to approach improving and reforming schools in a more humanistic manner in order to meet student needs.

The question that remains is, “Can unlearning work in traditional schools”? The principals noted the rigid structure of traditional school systems makes it a challenge to allot the time or space for unlearning to occur, which is why they sought different environments. School operations are dictated by schedules, bells, compliance, and curriculum taught in time restricted increments. According to the principals in the study, if conditions of safety, a focus on mission and vision, and the willingness to unlearn (Akgun Byrne et al., 2007; Becker, 2010; Tsang & Zahra, 2008) are present, unlearning can occur. This suggest that if leaders in traditional school can negotiate and leverage the space and create conditions in which unlearning can occur, it is plausible that unlearning can occur in traditional schools. Leadership and context (Lei, Slocum, and Pitts, 1999) play an important role in unlearning being successfully facilitated in traditional school settings.

The findings from this study support that unlearning is subsumable under learning as indicated in Figure 9. Additionally, unlearning and learning are cyclical processes that are interrelated to one another. On the learning continuum, the unlearning process represents a deeper level of reflection that elicits meaningful change whereas learning may not cause an individual to engage in deep reflection and meaningful change.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA allows researchers to focus on understanding participants' lived experiences. In an attempt to understand principals' experiences with facilitating school improvement through the process of unlearning, it is required the researcher to allow the phenomena to emerge, consider the participants as individuals and as a group, and keep the data collection and analysis true to the participants' lived experiences. IPA has its roots in psychology and was constructed as a theoretical framework and methodology to help researchers understand people as individuals, rather than as diagnoses. Because unlearning is a mental action, IPA was the appropriate theoretical approach to understanding and analyzing the data. Additionally, IPA requires the researcher to understand both the individual and the researcher herself.

Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger identified bracketing must be utilized so that the researcher can identify the phenomenon as it originally appears during the participant's recount of their lived experience so that the researchers do not impose their perspectives and assumptions on the lived experience. This was especially important as a leader in education because the context in which I understand education jargon may be completely different from the context and experiences of the participants—especially

since each participant operated under a different set of state and local policies and laws. Context contributes to the depth of understanding when engaging hermeneutics.

Heidegger believed researchers should utilize hermeneutics as a method to gain an understanding of a phenomenon that exceeds description (Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, 2007; Smith et al., 2013). Engaging in dialogue during the semi structured interviews allowed the researcher to better understand the context and conditions under which the phenomenon occurred. It also made it possible for the researcher to arrive at a deeper understanding of the participant's narrative of facilitating school improvement that involved unlearning. Gadamer saw reflection as essential to the hermeneutic elements of interpretative phenomenological analysis. The structure of the interview allowed the researcher to ask questions to scaffold the depth of participant recall when necessary.

Schleiermacher believed that as an interpretivist philosophy, phenomenology should consider both the context and linguistics the participants use when reliving the experience. Language provides insight into context, tone, mood, and intent. It can also reveal characteristics of the participant. The language participants used about traditional public school was one of frustration and hopelessness while the language used in their artifacts overwhelming highlighted their respective schools and initiatives as positive aspects of their schools. The participants recounted their experiences utilizing language that education research has identified as effective teaching and learning: Project Based Learning (PBL) and Positive Youth Development (PYD). The principals spoke more of the affective aspects of students and families, "viewing them as assets," "innovative," "not difficult kids, just need a different environment," "providing the students with what

is needed,” “we’re all in this together.” The principals identified these attributes of their schools as those that make them nontraditional.

Further, the principals did not acknowledge that many of the systems they have in place are reflective of traditional school settings—how they approach professional development (except Charles), or that their schools are funded by the state, and still accountable for state student testing. What sets each school apart from traditional schools is that each school has placed an emphasis on a specific industry or environmental issue that no other school in the area has focused on, the type of local governance, and the ability to adapt to environmental changes because of flexibility. Only one principal talked about the structural and human resource challenges of a nontraditional school—the others only mentioned the unlearning of themselves and staff as challenges.

Along with Schleiermacher, Sartre contributed to the study of phenomenology the importance of context. By learning participants’ profiles from the data gathered through interviews and observations, I was able to consider the historical context from which they spoke to the present day reality of their lived experiences. The principals described being in traditional public school settings which did not allow creative flexibility to educate children, so they opted for something different. The context within which each participant is facilitating school improvement/reform was self-initiated based upon negative experiences in public schools. Through the four school observations, I was better able to understand the context in which the principals claimed they successfully facilitated school improvement and school reform through the process of unlearning. Sartre emphasized the importance of context influencing participants’ understanding of their lived experiences as unfinished human beings. This was evidenced by the principals’



self-admission of unlearning with the staff and commitment to continue to work towards improving as leaders.

Husserl noted every act is based on a perception that has meaning. The principals' vision of what nontraditional schools should be was framed by the context of their experiences in traditional public school not meeting that vision. They perceived there was a better way to attain school improvement/reform. As Preston, et al. (2012) noted, many teachers who leave traditional school settings do so because of frustration with bureaucracy. The principals in this study opted to leave traditional schools for schools in which flexibility of educational practices was the philosophy and practice.

Next, the part of IPA that takes from Merleau-Ponty was evident during the interviews as well as after the interviews. Merleau-Ponty posited individuals should consider their experiences in a new light—without reliance upon categories that influence their interpretations. Each participant stated their recall of facilitating the school improvement/reform that involved unlearning was a good experience that allowed them to reflect on what they have accomplished and what they need to do in order to achieve their goals.

The philosophical tenets of IPA helped guide the analysis of the study that included the major contributions to phenomenology from Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schleiermacher, Sartre, and Gadamer. Context plays an integral role in facilitating unlearning; linguistics in the form of communication contributes to the success of that unlearning; and, when principals and teachers understand the role their experiences play in how they view schools and their roles within that context, school improvement has a much greater possibility of succeeding.

## **Implications**

### **Principals, Staff Developers, and District Administration**

The primary implication for principals is they should acknowledge and understand unlearning in order to improve their schools. As research has noted, there has to be a relationship between technical and humanistic school improvement initiatives in order for schools to improve. Historically, school improvement initiatives have remained technical and very little increase in student achievement has occurred. Second, principals and district administration must understand their roles as leaders influence the extent to which unlearning will occur; what they believe as educators and their leadership style dictates how they facilitate change. Third, principals must understand their beliefs and experiences play an integral role in their own leadership style; district/campus staff developers should recognize professional development should include both academic and humanistic topics. Fourth, principals should understand unlearning as a part of learning that is often overlooked; oftentimes, principals move quickly to engage their staffs in learning and forget an actual mental process must occur before individuals abandon old beliefs and behaviors. Additionally principals need to take the time to understand beliefs of staff in order to determine how, when, and what resources to utilize in order to facilitate school improvement. Sixth, principals should create conditions in which unlearning can occur; they must create spaces of safety and open communication. Next, principals should understand clear mission and vision are keys to unlearning keeping the unlearning targeted and on track. Last, principals must know how to intervene and take action when unlearning is not occurring within the organization or individual.

## **Academia**

The first implication for academia is to conduct more research on unlearning in an educational context to better understand the role it plays in learning and the importance of its relationship to learning. Second, more research focused on ways to facilitate changing people's beliefs in education utilizing unlearning needs to be conducted. Much of the unlearning literature is situated in the business and psychology fields, and perhaps unlearning could be seen as a better alternative to technical school reform efforts. Next, researchers should consider the courses they teach that prepare teachers and leaders of education to determine if the structure and content of the courses perpetuate the current state of school or allow for alternate ways of thinking about how schools operate. Additionally, asking preservice educators and leaders to examine their beliefs and behaviors before they become responsible for educating children could lessen the amount of unlearning that needs to take place. Last, researchers should continue to clarify the relationship between learning and unlearning.

## **Policy Makers**

Historically, the federal and state governments have equated school reform to striving for high standardized test results, getting rid of top management when those results are not met, giving families options for school via vouchers, and continuing to finance and promote charter schools as a response to traditional schools not succeeding. Legislation has created a vacuum of dissonance with educators, children, and their families being spun in circles with little viable options for effectively reforming schools. On one hand, legislators design policy that claim to support schools through standardization and program and resource development while on the other hand,

designing policy that allows for school choice because traditional public schools are viewed as not being successful thereby creating an education system to counter the alleged ineffective system they themselves designed. What the public fails to realize is that the education policies legislators draft create the inflexibility in traditional schools and allow for flexibility in market based schools. Through this action, policymakers acknowledge that flexibility in schools serves an important component to increasing student achievement and improving the educational experience of children but are creating an entirely different system suggesting the inflexibility they created in traditional public schools is difficult to eliminate.

The school reform the principals and I speak about is not based on standardization and school choice; in fact, it is focused on reform from within the organization through the individuals who affect it. Our school reform is about addressing the root issues, which are the beliefs and behaviors of educators and leaders. The principals in the study are not looking for scripted external programs to increase student achievement. The principals of the study are looking to reform the concept of education to make sure that there is equity in education—especially for those for who have not been successful in traditional school. While taking a humanistic approach to school reform is an necessary, it may be difficult to facilitate in any school setting due to the complexity and messiness of people examining their beliefs, publicly or privately, that may impact their professional behavior.

Policymakers must change the approach, language, and intent of school reform as well as redefine student achievement to include more than standardized test scores. Additionally, they must identify the immediate and long term consequences of solely

utilizing technical reform initiatives. Perhaps they should be required to personally implement policies they enact or observe the policy they pass from creation through implementation to the results/outcomes. Last, policy makers must address economic and political issues that contribute to success and failures of school—social and economic factors that adversely affect students and families.

### **Conclusion**

A limitation of mapping unlearning is that the concept is nebulous and has not been clearly defined in the business, education, or psychology fields. The research in business attempts to more distinctly describe the concept of unlearning and the factors and actions that are involved in it. This study contributes to the field as an attempt to tease out the concept of unlearning in education as an approach to provide a humanistic response to a humanistic system. Unlearning can be considered a step beyond superficial reflection as it involves examining beliefs one has always known to be true and having the courage to discard them when they are no longer relevant to the context. While the concept is a challenge to define, identify, and measure, it is worth exploring to get at the root issue of ineffective school improvement and reform initiatives and should not be ignored because of the complexity it presents.

This study supports the notion that unlearning should be given serious consideration when facilitating school improvement and reform. While the principals in this study acknowledged unlearning needed to occur, they appeared not to not take deliberate steps to select professional development to prompt staff to examine their beliefs and actions which adversely affected their schools, or beliefs and behaviors which progressively contributed to the school culture. They, instead, relied upon the

philosophies of the curricular and behavioral initiatives to change the minds of their staff. Since the principals made a deliberate attempt to hire individuals who shared their school's philosophy, this further supports the need for unlearning to be an deliberate act that school leaders should use in order to successfully facilitate school improvement. While facilitating school improvement/reform is a challenging endeavor, the rewards are far greater than technical school improvement/reform initiatives alone.

Technical school reform efforts alone do not improve schools as evidenced by the achievement gap that continues to exist between students of color and their White counterparts. Technical school reform efforts ignore the humanistic aspect of schools. Perhaps engaging in professional development to address cultural competency could be a pathway to unlearning as these curricula often evoke individuals to examine their beliefs and behaviors.

People bring with them their experiences, beliefs, and behaviors that affect the operations and culture of the organization. It is for this reason that behaviorists believe changes in the way people think and behave will have a great impact on the performance of the organization (Owens, 2004, p. 97). It is for this reason school leaders should understand, and consider addressing, human behavior when attempting to facilitate change through the process of unlearning. Without assessing existing ways of knowing and doing, individuals neither learn nor unlearn and end up remaining the same (Kramer, 2012). If we ignore unlearning in education, school reform will continue to be technical and only marginally effective. Consequently, schools will continue to operate in traditional ways, and policy makers will continue to ignore the political, social, and

economic factors that impact educational achievement of the very students the reform measures they pass claim to help.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A

Participant Data Collection Chart

Date & Source	
Name & Description	
School & Focus	
Level & Characteristics	
Location	
Method of Identification	
Non-Traditional Status	
Currently serving as principal	Y or N
Led or leading successful transformation or development of non-traditional processes of teaching & learning	One or both
Unlearning part of transformation or development	Y or N
Students' learning styles	
Principal provided evidence of being a non-traditional school & type	
Curriculum designed and learned through life situations	



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Definition of Unlearning Given to Potential Participants if Asked**

Unlearning is a process through which learners discard knowledge...and make way for new responses and mental maps (Hedberg, 1981). Unlearning is a process that individuals go through when they are introduced to new ways of thinking and acting that come into conflict with their existing ways of knowing and doing. When individuals decide to accept the new ways of knowing and doing and act upon those, then unlearning has occurred.

## APPENDIX C

### Phone Script

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Level:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Approved?    Yes    No**

- Identify principal.
- Verify principal meets criteria.
- Research the school for more information.
- Determine if the principal facilitated the school improvement that involved unlearning.
  - What would you say is the facilitation you conducted that resulted in school improvement?
  
- What part of facilitating involved having faculty and staff reframe their thoughts, beliefs, and actions?

- Contact principal via email and/or phone. Send introductory email or place a call.
- Ask principal for evidence of being a non-traditional school.
  - I see from your website and talking with (whoever recommended participant) that you seem to fit the criteria of being a non-traditional school. What other artifacts would you be able to provide to me that supports your success of facilitating the school improvement?
  - Thank you for speaking with me today. I will review the information I gathered from your website and reflect on our conversation. If you are selected to participate, I will send you an email. In the email I request a date and time during October to meet with you. The remainder of the process will include one in person interview that will last about 60 minutes. I will transcribe the interview and send the transcript to you to ensure you had the opportunity to express everything you wanted to. You will return your additions to me or send me an email stating everything is accurate within one week. Last, if I have any follow up questions, we can meet however is convenient for you—phone, video, or in person.
- Double check to ensure principal meets criteria, if so, inform via email and send the consent form. If not, inform participant via email or phone that he/she did not meet the criteria. Inform the principal that I will observe the school and that there will be a follow up interview in person, via phone, or video conference. Inquire about special permission in order to conduct the research.
- Schedule the interview with the principal when send consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_ Interview Date      Yes      No      Consent form  
sent?

- Conduct the interview and school visit.
- Transcribe the interview and return to participant.

Yes      No      Transcribed

Yes      No      Returned to participant

- Follow up with second interview.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Qualification Email**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

Based on our phone conversation and the notes I took, it appears as though you qualify to participate in the study.

The next steps in the process are:

1. For you and I to discuss what was the actual school improvement you facilitated.
2. If your experience meets the criteria and you agree to participate, sign and return the consent form.
3. Schedule a time for you and I to meet in person to conduct the interview (about 60 minutes) and for me to observe the campus.
4. Last, I will transcribe the interview and return it to you to ensure accuracy.
5. I may follow up with clarifying questions via phone, email, or video conference (whichever is convenient for you).

Please let me know a good time for you and I to continue to the conversation we started on Wednesday in order to address the first items on the list.

I look forward to speaking with you,

Tamey Williams  
512.736.2838

## APPENDIX E

### Consent Form to Participate in Interview

Title of Project: Unlearning as School Reform: How Principals Facilitate School Improvement in Non-Traditional Schools

Interviewer: Tamey R. Williams  
Doctoral Student  
Texas State University - San Marcos  
College of Education  
601 University Drive, ASB South 322  
San Marcos, TX 78666  
tameyw@yahoo.com  
Cellular Phone: (512) 736.2838

Principal Investigator: Sarah W. Nelson, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Texas State University - San Marcos  
College of Education  
601 University Drive, ASB South 322  
San Marcos, TX 78666  
[swnelson@txstate.edu](mailto:swnelson@txstate.edu)  
Office phone: (512) 245-9909  
Cellular phone: (512) 565-5286

Texas State University - San Marcos IRB approval # EXP2014W965541N

**PURPOSE:** You are being asked to participate in an interview that seeks to investigate principal leadership and organizational unlearning. You are specifically being asked to participate in this interview as a participant who might meet the criteria of the developing project. The intent of this interview is to understand your views and experiences as principal working to help education organizations unlearn. Specifically, during this interview, I will ask you questions about principal leadership and organizational unlearning you may have been a part of.

If you volunteer to participate in this interview, it will last for approximately 1 hour. In the interview, you will be asked to discuss your views and experiences with being a leader in an education setting. For instance, you will be asked to respond to statements and questions like the ones that follow: Describe your leadership style. Under what conditions does organizational unlearning occur? You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. Both interviews will be audio-recorded with your permission. Your participation is voluntary and as such, you may withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with Texas State University, San Marcos. This interview, with your permission, may be used as part of a research project.

**RISKS:** In reflecting and talking about your experience as a principal leader, you may become uncomfortable with recalling unhappy experiences or memories. However, you may elect to not answer any of the questions with which you feel uneasy and still remain a participant in the interview. There are no known psychological or physiological risks associated with participating in this interview. However, some of the questions may be considered sensitive. Participants are not required to respond to any question that they do not feel comfortable answering. All answers will remain confidential.

**BENEFITS:** You may not benefit from your participation in this research. This interview on principal leadership and organization unlearning may be beneficial to professors, doctoral students in education, university administrators, and school leaders in understanding how best to best prepare administrators to facilitate organizational unlearning. In addition, the interview may provide further insight into understanding how principal leadership affects organizational unlearning in education.

**COMPENSATION:** You will not be paid for participation in this interview.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your name will never appear on any survey, research, or interview instruments. No identity will be made in the data analysis. All written materials and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the interviewer's home office and the principal investigator, Dr. Sarah W. Nelson, will have sole access. Your response(s) may appear only in statistical data summaries when the data are presented in written or oral form at scientific meetings. Your responses will appear in the assignment connected to the interview. Your name will never appear in any publication of these data. All materials will be kept for three years.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this interview. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this interview will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

This project [EXP2014W965541N] was approved by the Texas State IRB on [8-22-2014]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 - [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)) and to Becky Northcut, Director, Research Integrity & Compliance (512-245-2314 - [bnorthcut@txstate.edu](mailto:bnorthcut@txstate.edu)).

Questions about this research should be addressed to Tamey Williams at 512.736.2838 or via email at [tw27446@txstate.edu](mailto:tw27446@txstate.edu).

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**Participant's Signature**

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**Date**

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**Investigator's Signature**

**Date**



## APPENDIX F

### Semi Structured Interview Schedule

1. Who is \_\_\_\_\_ (name of principal)?
2. Tell me about your principalship experiences.
3. How would you define/describe school improvement?
4. What do you think is the role of the principal when facilitating school improvement?
5. How is your school different from a traditional school in the United States?
  - a. For schools with non-traditional structures or processes of teaching and learning: How is your process of \_\_\_\_\_ (name of non-traditional teaching and learning process) different from that of a traditional school?
6. How would you define/describe a non-traditional school?
  - a. For schools with non-traditional structures or processes: How would you define/describe non-traditional processes of teaching and learning? What motivated you to start \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the non-traditional teaching and learning process)?
7. What motivated you to start a nontraditional school?
  - a. What did you consider?
  - b. To what extent?
  - c. What were the successes?
  - d. What were the challenges?
  - e. For schools with non-traditional teaching and learning processes: How did you establish the non-traditional teaching and learning process?
    - i. What did you consider?
    - ii. To what extent?
    - iii. What were the successes?
    - iv. What were the challenges?
8. Thinking back, what formal/informal life experiences/professional development have you had that helped you successfully facilitate this type of school improvement?

9. How do you define success? How do you know facilitating this school improvement was successful?
  - a. In addition to the artifacts you identified during our initial conversation, do you have any more you can provide to me today that reflects the success of the school improvement?
10. Is there anything else I should know about the school improvement that I may not have asked?
11. What part, if any, involved the staff having to unlearn old beliefs, behaviors, and routines? (Provide description of unlearning again if participant cannot recall from initial conversation.)
  - a. How did the process of unlearning influence your facilitation of school improvement?
  - b. What was the tipping point?
  - c. How did you know what the staff was experiencing?
  - d. How did you address the unlearning as it took place?
12. Do you have any questions for me?

## APPENDIX G

### Artifacts Analyzed

Artifacts	Professional Development Plans	News Articles	Memos & Letters	Staff/ Student Remarks	Anecdotes	School Website	Operational Calendars	Campus Observation	Assessment Grading Rubrics	Surveys	Meeting Minutes
Charles	P		P	P	P	R	P & R		R*		P & R
Kenneth		R	P	P	P	R	P & R	R	P	P	P & R
Thomas	P	P		P	P	R	R	R			P & R
Tanya	P	R	P	P	P	R	P & R	R	P	P	P & R
Brenda				P	P	R	P & R	R	R		P & R

P= Artifact Provided by Participant

R= Artifact Found by Researcher

R\*= Researcher Found Standardized Test Artifact

## APPENDIX I

### Open Coding & Categories

<u>Participant #1</u>	
<u>Column 1</u>	<u>Column 2</u>
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Teacher decision making</b>
<b>Work history</b>	Learning connected to real life
Motivation to enter education	Different POVs influence
Purpose of ed	Flexibility to make changes as need arises
Empowering others	Autonomy, creativity
<b>Self-reflection</b>	Individual responsibility
Identifying root issues	Trust
Evolving leadership	Identifying & measuring growth
Self directed learning	Leadership qualities
Continuous leadership	Technical responses
Searching for challenge	Prin identities
Willingness to try different things-change	Trying new programs
Awareness of what want school to look like aspiring	School community relationship
Student engagement through service learning	Growing teacher leader capacity
Risk taking	Identify reflect find
<b>Chars of unlearning</b>	Allow space and time for mistakes and implementation
Safety to make mistakes	Genuine care for staff
Culture of teachers as a community	Numbness
Non traditional chars	Growth exposure from others models
Use of pd time	Buy-in
	Personal experience inform current practice
	Evidence of success
	Not enough time to do work

## APPENDIX J

### Categories

<u>Common Codes Participant 1</u>	<u>Supporting Code 1</u>	<u>Supporting Code 2</u>	<u>Supporting Code 3</u>	<u>Supporting Code 4</u>	<u>Supporting Code 5</u>	<u>Supporting Code 6</u>	<u>Supporting Code 7</u>
<b>Leadership</b>	Leadership qualities	Prin identities	Genuine care for staff	Not enough time to do work	Identifying root issues	Self directed learning	Continuous leadership
<b>Work history</b>	Personal experience inform current practice	work history	Motivation to enter education				
<b>Self-reflection</b>	Purpose of ed	Empowering others					
<b>Change</b>	Searching for challenge	Willingness to try different things-change	Risk taking	Culture of teachers as a community			
<b>Chars of unlearning</b>	Allow space and time for mistakes and implementation	Safety to make mistakes					
<b>Students</b>	Student engagement through service learning						

<b>professional growth</b>	Growing teacher leader capacity	Identify reflect find	Use of pd time				
<b>Teacher decision making</b>	Learning connected to real life						
<b>NT</b>	Learning connected to real life	Different POVs influence	Flexibility to make changes as need arises	Autonomy, creativity	Individual responsibility	Non traditional chars	
<b>Relationships</b>	Trust	School community relationship	Buy-in				
<b>Success defined</b>	Evidence of success						
<b>Vision/Mission</b>	Awareness of what want school to look like aspiring						

## APPENDIX K

### Theme by Participant

<u>Common Codes P1</u>	<u>Supporting Code 1</u>	<u>Supporting Code 2</u>	<u>Supporting Code 3</u>	<u>Supporting Code 4</u>	<u>Supporting Code 5</u>	<u>Supporting Code 6</u>	<u>Supporting Code 7</u>
<b>Leadership</b>	Leadership qualities	Prin identities	<u>Genuine care for staff</u> "The other thing is, you know, I don't want to sound too mushy here, but, you know, loving, loving your staff. I mean, I love these guys. You know, not in a romantic way, but, you know, they work hard, they go above and beyond. You know, we don't have a lot of the resources that major independent school districts have, but they don't complain, they work, you know. And so I respect them for that. So, yeah, you know-- I had to get all teary on this. " <b>pg 31 line</b>	<u>Not enough time to do work</u> "Well, you know, I was-- I think I was on to something my first year here because I've met with at the end of each semester, I cleared my calendar for that day and I wanted to meet with every single teacher face to face to talk about the successes, failures, whatever challenges they have in their class. But, man, that's time consuming. But I have to get back to that. I think it really gets down to that face to face conversation. Or	<u>Identifying root issues</u> "because it helped me see that the achievement gaps that we see on the surface, there's so much more that's happening under the surface that requires a tremendous amount of support, not just from the school but from other agencies, government agencies and when you're dealing with students who, you know, they have healthcare issues that can be addressed. You know, there is a housing issue that we need to address, there is a, you know, kids	<u>Self directed learning</u> "...I selected Akins because I wanted to work for this particular principal. She had been in that role for a while, well respected, really knew the business of running a school, really knew, you know, how do you nurture, how do you grow educators, you know. So I really-- I went there wanting to really hone, you know, my craft...I was there for about 3 years and then I kept my ties with Del Valle " <b>pg 4</b>	<u>Continuous leadership development</u> "...but I'm learning, the more I'm in administrative work that you had to let people know that you appreciate them. " <b>pg 33 line 562</b> "She invited me and I think there were three teachers and herself, we went up to New York City and we went out to New York City to study the small schools movement, the Deborah Meier schools in Manhattan. That trip I tell you had a tremendous impact on the possibilities of what schools can

			<b>541</b>	it's about how can I build capacity with my department leaders to be able to take that on as well, you know, 'cause it's just not one person, you know. I think it has to be a community. " pg 45 line 792	who, you know, needed glasses and the families couldn't afford it. And then there's also, you know, parent income issues, you know. So, I mean, you're dealing with so many factors and then, you know, at the same time you have to make sure the students are learning what they need to learn. " <b>pg 4 line 55</b>	<b>line 69</b> "I was like, wow, I've never been a principal before. What do I do? So I must have read every single book, Reeves had ever written. Michael Fullan, you know, I just kind of really inundated myself with, you know, leadership, you know, principalship, what does it mean. Called people, I set up three interviews with people in that capacity that I respected. And so I set up some, you know, lunch meetings with people, just to say, hey, just tell me, talk to me, you know, what would you do going into a new place. So I was able to really get some good	be. " <b>pg 33 line 583</b>
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						information and I was really set out really well." <b>p5 line 85</b>	
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## APPENDIX L

### Participant Codes Compared

Common Codes				
<u>Participant 1</u>	<u>Participant 3</u>	<u>Participant 4</u>	<u>Participant 5</u>	<u>Participant 6</u>
Leadership	nontraditional characteristics	SI v reform	traditional school chars	self-description
Work history	UL characteristics	role of principal	change	persona, professional exper
Self-reflection	traditional v nontraditional	school designed w/end in mind	personal experience	Leadership
Change	self-reflection	limitations of traditional school	pathway to leadership	traditional school structured
Chars of unlearning	leadership practice	nontraditional characteristics	school board	chars of SI
Students	leadership characteristics	traditional v nontraditional	role of leader	role of principal
professional growth	self-reflection	align strengths w/ leadership	SI described	NT ways of teaching
	leadership practice	chars of students	communication	NT chars

Teacher decision making	relationship building	communication	eliminating power structure (to building relationships)	challenges students face
NT	self-reflection	success defined	student centered	self-reflection
Relationships	UL	Change	staff/teachers	work w/ other professionals to help students succeed
Success defined	changing mindset		NT chars	role of PD
Vision/Mission	self-reflection		relationships	Communication
	resistance to turning trad		anecdote of success	school itself
	internal battle		no one answer to school reform	Staff/Teachers
	nontraditional chars			UL chars
	nontraditional v traditional			change
	leadership quality			success=open to change
	evolution of George Mason			

	burned out from traditional education			
	personal experience to guide work			
	school board at George Mason v traditional setting			
	success=qualitative and quantitative measures			
	communication as a weakness (SI)			
	nontraditional chars			

## APPENDIX L

### Participant Codes Compared and Color Coded

Color Coded Codes				
Participant 1	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Change	burned out from trad educat	align strengths w/ leadrshp	anecdote of success	challenges students face
Chars of unlearning	changing mindset	Change	change	change
Leadership	communicat as weakness (SI)	chars of students	communication	chars of SI
NT	evolution of George Mason	communication	eliminating power structure (to building relationships)	communication
professional growth	internal battle	limitations of trad school	no one answer to school reform	leadership
Relationships	leadership characteristics	nontradit characteristics	NT chars	NT chars
Self-reflection	leadership practice	role of principal	pathway to leadership	NT ways of teaching
Students	leadership practice	school designed w/end in mind	personal experience	persona, professional experien
Success defined	leadership quality	SI v reform	relationships	role of PD
Teacher decision making	Nontraditional characteristics	success defined	role of leader	role of principal
Vision/Mission	nontraditional chars	traditional v nontraditi	school board	school itself
Work history	nontraditional chars		SI described	self-description

	nontraditional v traditional		staff/teachers	self-reflection
	personal experience to guide work		student centered	Staff/Teachers
	relationship building		traditional school chars	success=open to change
	resistance to turning traditional			traditional school structured
	school board at George Mason v traditional setting			UL chars
	self description			work with other professionals to help students succeed
	self-reflection			
	self-reflection			
	self-reflection			
	self-reflection			
	success=qual & quant measure			
	traditional v nontraditional			
	UL			
	UL characteristics			

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