

Principals and Teacher Leaders Co-Constructing Theories in Practice: Empowerment and Accountability Exchanged

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which principal and teacher leaders at four purposefully selected schools collaboratively developed theories in practice related to the exchange between empowerment and accountability envisioned by education reform researchers. The researchers posited the trade-off between empowerment and responsibility would never occur without the principal and teacher leaders forming a consensus-building group and co-developing theories in practice as the basis for improving schools. Two research questions guided this investigation: (a) To what extent were principal espoused theories in practice and modeled behaviors congruent; and (b) To what extent did the principal and teacher leaders co-develop theories in practice related to the trade-off between empowerment and accountability. A qualitative, multiple case study design was used for this project. Data were collected by interview, observation, document mining, and norm checklist. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with six teacher leaders and the principal at each site and used a focus group at each site to clarify the wording on the norm checklist at each school. Findings indicated that the principal influenced, to a large degree, the co-developed theories in practice of teacher leaders and the principals. Many commonalities surfaced in this study among and between principal theories in practice and among and between principal and teacher leader co-developed theories in practice. The four most common themes comprising the collective theories in practice were: (a) building relationships, (b) focusing on students as a priority, (c) making collective decisions, and (d) accepting responsibility for schoolwide outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

A change in the roles and responsibilities of school principals emerged from education reforms of recent decades. Reformers recognized a need to shift the paradigm for principal leadership's definition of authority from one of power over people to one of power over the accomplishments and achievements of organizational goals. Decades of educational reforms pushed principals to move from an autocratic model to a more collaborative model (Friend and Cook 1990, p. 70).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a report called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (U.S. Department of Education 1983, p. 5). The report warned unless the education system improved, the United States would lose its global superiority. Three years after the publication *A Nation at Risk* was released, several organizations also published reports on the state of American schools, for example, *Tomorrow's Teachers: A*

Report to the Holmes Group and A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century (Holmes Group 1986; Carnegie Corporation 1986). Both reports called for improvement in the quality of educators serving in American schools.

In 1989, governors across the United States gathered for a summit to develop strategies for education reform (Vinovskis 1999, 1). One idea that emerged from the summit was decentralization -- the idea that government regulates and rewards higher student achievement and that school-level educators produce results. State education reform policies began reflecting school level empowerment coupled with accountability components focused on higher student achievement. These policies pushed decision making and accountability to the school level and away from district offices and state departments of education (Vinovskis, 18).

The policy trade-off of empowerment for accountability was brought to life in Kentucky in 1990 through state education reform. As a result of a lawsuit that alleged inequities in the existing education system (Hoyt N.D., 1), state legislators passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA). The law mandated decentralization through the establishment of school councils and breathed life into governors' willingness to trade greater empowerment for greater accountability. Kentucky required that school councils comprised of teachers, principals, and parents adopt policies focused on increasing student achievement.¹

To prepare educators for the shift from hierarchical, top-down leadership to a vertical, school-level leadership, school council members participated in mandated state department of education training designed to address the roles and responsibilities for shared-decision making and school governance.² Following the training, principals chaired the school councils³ and were charged with facilitating collaborative decision making. Despite the leadership role assigned to the principal, the legislation does not address training for principals to convert the structural changes from the law into corresponding changes in organizational norms.⁴

In addition to mandating the establishment of school councils, KERA included an accountability component that required schools to meet predetermined and unique achievement goals. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) placed another layer of accountability on

¹ The School-Based Decision Making Law, Ky. Rev. Stat. 160.345 (1990).

² The School-Based Decision Making Law, Ky. Rev. Stat. 160.345 § 6 (1990).

³ The School-Based Decision Making Law, Ky. Rev. Stat. 160.345 § 2 (1990).

⁴ The School-Based Decision Making Law, Ky. Rev. Stat. 160.345 § 6 (1990).

Kentucky schools; both NCLB and KERA shared a common mandate that all students perform at a proficient level (Kentucky Department of Education 2005; Yell and Drasgow 2005). Most recently, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). Similar to KERA and NCLB, the law demands accountability; however, ESSA transferred much of NCLB federal accountability back to the states.

Education reformers traded accountability for decentralization of power (Kentucky Department of Education 2005; Yell and Drasgow 2005). The reforms increased pressure on schools to advance student learning and on principals to effectively implement reform initiatives. The role of the principal became more complex requiring principals to be able to manage increasing complexity and more rapid change (Fullan 2002, 16). Several researchers noted that principals modeling leadership qualities were an effective teaching method to facilitate change in teachers (Barile 1994, 498-518).

Keedy and Achilles (1997, 117) and Keedy (2005, 148) suggested that school principals who developed theories in practice of their own could be catalysts to facilitate change in schools. Argyris and Schön (1974) described how theories in practice used a system of continuous loops encompassing inquiry, testing, and learning. Keedy and Achilles (108) contended theories in practice uncover and influence normative thinking helping to fuse the rift between espoused beliefs, values and assumptions, and corresponding actions and behaviors. To meet these high standards, principals needed the intellectual capacity to align their espoused theories with their actions before they modeled and led others. “If we scratch the surface of educational practice . . . we find, not universal natural laws, but beliefs and values” (Grundy 1987, 7). These values and beliefs should be manifested in the minds and the actions of principals.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

KERA (1990) and NCLB (2001) mandated schools to decentralize and improve student achievement (Kentucky Department of Education 2005). In Kentucky, education reform forced the establishment of empowering structures, including school councils and leadership committees. According to Keedy and Achilles (1997, 103), mere implementation of organization structures does little to forge key relationships in schools related to enhancing the school culture and changing school norms. Although reform advanced changes in structural thinking, it failed to address the needed changes in normative thinking that would build essential relationships in schools such as

principal-teacher, teacher-teacher, and teacher-student (103-6). According to Keedy and Simpson (2001, 10-41), these relationships failed to evolve.

Researchers noted that principals and teacher leaders were essential to school improvement (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005, 5; Conley and Muncey 1999, 46). Acknowledging their importance did not guarantee all or most schools were led by principals who empowered teachers, cultivated teacher leadership and collaborated with teacher leaders to increase instructional capacity.

Embedded in education reform was the assumption that principals already understood how to develop and nurture instructional capacity in teacher leaders (Keedy and Simpson 2001). Instructional capacity in schools did not increase fast enough to ensure that students reached a proficient level of performance by 2014 (Konz 2007). Conversely, in the Equity and Excellence Commission's Report, *For Each and Every Child: A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence* (U.S. Department of Education 2013, 12), the Commission posited the American education system failed to address the needs of students in high-poverty schools,

“. . . some young Americans – most of them white and affluent – are getting a truly world-class education. Those who attend schools in high poverty neighborhoods are getting an education that more closely approximates school in developing nations.”

The report called for a redesign of the education system with accountability criteria, emphasizing accountability as an important area of concern. “Actors at every level should be empowered and held responsible according to their role [*sic*] . . .” (37).

In recent decades, researchers acknowledged principals cannot improve instructional capacity alone; they need teacher leaders (Keedy and McDonald 2002, 12). According to Keedy and Achilles (1997, 106-15) schools improve when principals and teacher leaders engage in reflective practices and theorize collectively about the needed change. Principals and teacher leaders are important factors in school improvement (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005, 5; Conley and Muncey 1999, 46). Researchers found that “both the principal and teachers must be involved in the exchange process to ignite the collective power of the full staff to improve student outcomes” (Murley, Keedy, and Welch 2008, 392). Murley, Keedy, and Welsh found that social influence could be exchanged to increase instructional capacity and improve student outcomes.

Keedy and Achilles (1997, 114) suggested that principals and teacher leaders theorize about

instructional improvements using “why,” “what,” and “how” questions. They created a conceptual model that operationalized the empowerment-for-accountability trade-off from education reform. The model demonstrates principals and teacher leaders collectively engaging in critical inquiry by querying “why,” which involves critiquing existing and formulating new assumptions about school improvement. To address the “what” question, principals and teacher leaders respond to new or emerging assumptions through the development of a “contextual mindset” (115), which provides logic to the reform structures of school councils. Finally, asking “how” propels normative change to occur and involves monitoring the change process. By doing so, a collective group might implement change designed to impact instructional capacity and collectively monitor its effectiveness.

Collectively education reforms pushed decision-making to the school level through decentralization. To move beyond the mere structures of reform mandates such as school-based decision-making councils, principals, and teachers need models of practitioners whose assumptions or beliefs about decision-making lead to empowerment (Vinovskis 1999; Yell and Drasgow 2005). This study, therefore, assessed to what extent congruency existed between principal espoused theories in practice and principal modeled behaviors related to empowerment and the extent to which the principal and teacher leaders at four purposefully selected schools co-constructed clearly defined theories in practice related to the exchange between empowerment for accountability.

STUDY DESIGN

This study used a qualitative, multiple case study design to examine principal espoused and principal and teacher leader co-constructed theories in practice at four purposefully selected schools. Two questions framed this study:

To what extent does congruency exist between principal espoused theories in practice and principal modeled behaviors relate to empowerment?

To what extent do principals and teacher leaders co-develop clear theories in practice grounded in the policy trade-off between empowerment and accountability?

The case study design allowed the researchers to examine formal and informal interactions and theories in use naturalistically as principals and teacher leaders conducted their work and interacted in their own environment.

Selection of Sample

The purposeful sample used in this study was suggested by researchers who postulated that purposeful sampling “. . . increases the scope and range of data exposed . . . as well as the likelihood that the full array of multiple realities will be uncovered” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 40). The most reasonable likelihood of identifying intelligent principals whose assumptions empowered teacher leaders emerged from the recommendations of those who worked closely with school principals every day, the superintendents. The researchers employed the reputation technique to identify the purposeful sample. Goetz and LeCompte (1984, 82) found that by using the reputation technique to select participants,

“. . . the researcher chooses instances on the recommendations of experienced experts in an area.”

Principals were identified and nominated to participate by superintendents from a south-central Kentucky educational cooperative. They met the following selection criteria: (a) collaborated with teacher leaders to make decisions that increased instructional capacity, (b) reflected on their instructional leadership, (c) collectively hypothesized with teacher leaders about actions that might improve instructional capacity, (d) collaborated with school councils rather dictated to them, (e) served as the leader in the same school for at least three consecutive years, (f) served schools meeting or exceeding the predetermined achievement goals during the 2006 biennium, as measured by Commonwealth Assessment Testing System, and (g) welcomed researchers examining their instructional leadership processes.

The researchers verified the accuracy of selection criteria for nominated principals and purposefully selected three principals to participate. A fourth principal whose school did not meet its accountability goal for one biennium was chosen because several individuals had nominated him. Although this school did not meet its accountability goal, it scored higher than two of the three schools purposefully selected for this study.

Each of the four principals who participated in the study identified two teacher leaders at their schools who (a) served in formal leadership roles such as members of the school council or team leaders and (b) represented a variety of grade levels. Once two principal-nominated teacher leaders at each school agreed to participate, each teacher leader identified two additional teacher leaders who: (a) demonstrated leadership formally or informally and (b) represented a variety of grade levels. Six teacher leaders were selected at each site. The final group of teacher leaders

identified four additional teachers at each school to participate in a focus group (Folch-Lyon and Trost 1993, 443-449). The selection of focus group members consisted of teacher leaders using the following selection criteria to nominate fellow teachers who (a) represented a variety of grade levels and (b) demonstrated communication skills. Finally, each principal identified one research coordinator from their school leadership team to administer and collect the norm checklist.

Data Sources

The researchers collected data from principal and teacher leader interviews, observations, document mining, and norm checklists. As part of the observations, the researchers attended a variety of meetings (e.g., faculty, school council, etc.) over a four-month period.

Data Analysis

The researchers used the constant-comparative method. This process continued until categories emerged or new categories were developed (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Chapter 5) and until freshly collected data confirmed existing categories. Principal and teacher interview data, document mining, and observation data provided a baseline from which to develop a norm checklist. Focus groups clarified the data. The researcher calculated results based on the number of teacher responses and the total number of positive responses divided by a total number of responses. The norm was considered verified if it received an agreement rate equal to at least 70 percent (Keedy and Simpson 2001). Norms confirmed modeled behaviors and interactions among teacher leaders and each principal regarding empowerment and accountability.

Trustworthiness and Methodological Limitations

Several methods ensured trustworthiness of data and helped offset the limitations of this study. Researchers used triangulation, member checks, reflexive journal, cross-case analysis, multiple methods, and thick, rich description to counter limitations such as the small number of schools in the study. The limitation of researcher bias was reduced as researchers clarified assumptions before beginning the study. To further reduce biases, researchers monitored audio recordings, coding, and theme development. Finally, because of the small number of students attending each school, ranging from 480 to 1,060, it is unknown if the findings from this study would apply to larger schools.

Participants

Principal Frances/Columbus Elementary School

Principal Frances began his teaching career at Columbus Elementary School. He spent seven years

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teaching at the intermediate level and was in his sixth year as principal. All of his professional experience was at Columbus Elementary School except student teaching at a middle school in a neighboring district.

Approximately two-thirds of the 480 students at Columbus Elementary School in preschool through sixth-grade center qualified for the federally funded free and reduced lunch program. The minority enrollment was less than one percent and only one student spoke English as a second language. Twenty-nine teachers worked at Columbus Elementary School.

Mr. Michaels/Charles Jefferson Elementary School

When the Charles Jefferson Elementary School council hired Mr. Michaels as principal seven years ago, he was a veteran in education. He taught health and physical education in kindergarten through twelfth grades, served as an assistant director of pupil personnel and vocational school coordinator, and started an alternative and night school in a neighboring district.

Approximately 580 students were enrolled in grades preschool through six. Forty-four percent of the student population qualified for the federally-funded free and reduced lunch program, and minority students accounted for 10% of the current student body. There were approximately 29 certified staff members.

Mr. Bain/Mt. Pleasant Middle School

Principal Bain was in his fourth year as principal at Mt. Pleasant Middle School. He began his career at the school as a science teacher before moving into the position of assistant principal. Seven years later, he was hired as the principal. He had also served as a custodian, painter and bus driver.

Mt. Pleasant Middle School served approximately 500 students in the seventh and eighth grades, but the student population fluctuated greatly, illustrating the transitory nature of families. Sixty-one percent of the students were eligible for the free and reduced federal lunch program. Minority students comprised four percent of the student body. Thirty teachers worked at Mt. Pleasant Middle School.

Mr. Clark/Syd Lee High School

Mr. Clark was in his sixth year as principal at Syd Lee High School. His experiences included serving as an elementary school principal for three years in the same district. Clark was a teacher at

Syd Lee before being hired as an administrator at the school.

Syd Lee High School served students in the ninth through twelfth grades. Of the 1,060 students who were enrolled, approximately one-third were out-of-district students whose families paid tuition. Forty-five percent of the students were eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. Minority students comprised 30% of the student body, and 13% of the students were limited English proficient (LEP). Eighty teachers taught at Syd Lee High School.

Results

Mr. Frances/Columbus Elementary School

At Columbus Elementary School, Principal Frances had two personal theories in practice: (a) collective decision-making and (b) responsibility for schoolwide outcomes. Both theories in practice aligned with his modeled behaviors.

Frances's first theory in practice, *collective decision making*, placed authority firmly with teachers who made most academic and behavioral decisions. Frances gave away much of his decision-making power because he believed that teachers were professionals who should be trusted to make decisions. "I think everybody that works here is a professional, and we can make professional decisions, and I should not have to be the person to micromanage every single thing that they do."

Frances shared so much of his decision-making power that teacher leaders found it overwhelming at times. Teacher Leader Stanley, for example, reported that faculty members often carry much of the decision-making load. "Well, it is not really like a teacher-principal relationship. We pretty much run ourselves..." Teacher leaders perceived that they operated on a relatively flat plane with Frances regarding decision making.

Frances's second theory in practice, *responsibility for schoolwide outcomes*, manifested as self-reflection and acceptance of responsibility for school outcomes. Frances reflected personally on his decisions and the decisions of others. He also facilitated activities requiring reflection by teachers (e.g., annual test data analysis).

Principal and teacher leaders co-constructed two theories in practice: (a) collective decision-making and (b) individual responsibility. Although collective decision making occurred, the lack of a co-developed theory in practice related to accepting responsibility collectively

impeded the development of an exchange between empowerment for accountability envisioned by education reform writers.

Teachers made most decisions, thereby institutionalizing the first co-constructed theory of collective *decision making*. Frances rarely participated in the decision-making process, and his absence impeded the development of that collective accountability that Keedy and Achilles (1997, 115) hypothesized in their conceptual model. Teacher Leader Stanley implied Frances needed to be more involved in decision-making. “If Columbus Elementary School did not have such a strong faculty, empowerment might go terribly wrong. It could go really bad if we didn’t have this staff.” She described the staff as “. . . very committed and very willing . . .” Teacher Leader Jackson explained there were times when Frances probably should have made a decision without asking teachers for their opinions. She believed that Frances should have “. . . just made a decision himself.”

Teacher leaders, typically, held themselves *individually accountable* for the achievement of students at their own grade levels even though they made decisions regarding schoolwide outcomes. Teacher Leader Johnson explained, “I think each of us kind of looks out for ourselves.” Teacher Leader Jackson reported teachers not teaching in a tested grade are often unaware of how they should contribute, such as with the schoolwide writing plan. “And . . . the reason I would say some teachers don’t feel accountable is because . . . we don’t even know [about the plan], and [teachers] say ‘What is that?’ And it is written in our plan at our grade level. We are supposed to do it. Then, I think, obviously, we do not feel the accountability for our part of it.”

At Columbus Elementary School, teachers did not collectively hold themselves accountable; therefore, the trade-off of empowerment for accountability was not operationalized.

Mr. Michaels/Charles Jefferson Elementary School (CJES)

At CJES, Principal Michaels espoused three personal theories in practice: (a) relationships between students and adults and among adults, (b) empowerment of teachers, and (c) responsibility for schoolwide outcomes. All three of Michaels’ theories in practice aligned with his modeled behaviors. Michaels’ possessed a strong theory in practice regarding *relationships between students and adults and among adults*. He, for example, professed to place student needs above all others. “We are here for the kids.” He cared about them beyond their enrollment at Charles Jefferson Elementary School. “I actually go to Laurel G. Payne Middle School once or twice a year and stand

in the hallway to see my former kids.” The relationships that he established and nurtured with students and with teachers manifested in his other theories in practice. He invested a great deal of energy into building and strengthening his personal relationship with students and with teachers. He greeted every student personally each day, and if he failed to notice a student enter the building, the student waited patiently for his turn to be greeted and engaged in some form of positive discourse. Staff members were also the recipients of his attention. Teacher Leader Davids explained that Michaels did special things to show how much he cared about them. “During Teacher Appreciation Week, he made dinner for us.” His relationships with students and teachers laid the foundation for all other behaviors and decisions.

Empowerment emerged as Michaels’s second theory in practice. He empowered teachers to make decisions and solicited their input in decisions that he made unilaterally. He posited that for those teachers to be empowered, they had to feel they were important and had input into whatever happens. Knowing that he could not improve student learning alone, Michaels demonstrated he needed teachers by asking them to meet in their committees and teams to make instructional and behavioral decisions. Teacher Leader Cole viewed Michaels as a safety net for collaborative decision making, “He allows them (teachers) to make decisions, but he makes sure that their decisions are legal and that the budget allows for expenditures to support teacher decisions.”

The third theory in practice possessed by Michaels was *responsibility*. He held himself accountable for schoolwide outcomes. He reflected routinely and publicly apologized if he made a mistake. An important part of accountability emerged in the monitoring of all decision making and the outcomes of all decisions. Michaels communicated transparently by publicly responding to all questions and concerns.

For research question two, three co-constructed theories in practice solidified the exchange of empowerment for accountability: (a) relationships between adults and students and among adults, (b) empowerment, and (c) collective responsibility for schoolwide outcomes.

The first theory in practice co-developed by teacher leaders and Michaels, *relationships between adults and students and among adults*, demonstrated that a focus on students was their modus operandi. They cared about and trusted one another. Grounding decisions in the best interest of students emerged as their most important priority. Michaels modeled his personal relationship theory by placing students first. He and teacher leaders emulated his theory when they developed a

theory regarding relationships with students and with each other.

The second co-constructed theory in practice, *empowerment*, emerged when teachers made decisions in their committees, teams, and as a faculty due to Michaels believing that is where decisions should be made. Teacher leaders perceived their input as valued and instrumental in school improvement. Michaels's personal theory in the practice of empowerment provided the framework for the co-development of theories in practice regarding empowerment.

Collective accountability arose as the third co-developed theory in practice. Teachers worked collaboratively to improve schoolwide student outcomes. Those teaching at one grade level, for example, held themselves accountable for student outcomes two grade levels beyond. Teacher Leader Janes explained how teachers demonstrate accountability. "I think we have more of a sense of buy-in in the whole school where teachers feel that it is a collective responsibility. Even if you are not teaching in an assessed grade level, it is our responsibility to lay the foundation as they go through each grade level." It was not unusual for teachers in two different grade levels to reflect on outcomes and to resolve emerging concerns collectively. Teachers at all grade levels celebrated student successes regardless of the grade level experiencing that success. A collective team existed where teachers and Michaels made decisions and held themselves accountable for schoolwide outcomes. Teacher leaders and Michaels co-developed theories in practice that operationalized the exchange of empowerment for accountability.

Mr. Bain/Mt. Pleasant Middle School

Principal Bain at Mt. Pleasant Middle School espoused four personal theories in practice related to teacher empowerment. Three of his theories in practice manifested strongly in his modeled behaviors: (a) laser-like focus on students and research, (b) collective decision makers, and (c) personal responsibility for school outcomes. Bain's behaviors, to a lesser and diminishing degree, supported his fourth espoused theory in practice: (d) principal as a decision maker.

Principal Bain's first theory in practice, *a laser-like focus on students and on using research* to benefit students, involved an unwavering focus on the needs of students and on using research to identify how best to address student needs. "My priority, the reason that we are all here is to assist students. I keep my eye on the target at all times I do very few things that I have not found somewhere in some study or in somebody's work that says this is a good practice." Teacher leaders verified Bain's reliance on research. "He keeps his ear to the road and knows his research"

explained Teacher Leader Tyler. Teachers verified Bain had a laser-like focus on students as evidenced by the 100% teacher agreement rate on the norm checklist. Bain's focus on students left little wiggle room and placed a gentle pressure on teachers to focus on students when they made collective decisions. They, too, had to put students first, which strengthened their collective student-centered priority and parlayed into a similar co-developed theory in practice.

Two principal theories in practice, *collective decision makers* and the *principal as decision maker*, appeared to clash. This was resolved by examining the robustness of each. Collective decision makers emerged as the stronger of Bain's theories in practice related to who made decisions. This may have occurred because Bain used his positional power and made many unilateral decisions early in his tenure. Upon reflection, he recognized that these hierarchical decisions failed to secure teacher ownership. The lack of teacher support for Bain's early decisions exerted pressure for change on Bain's own behaviors, nudging the principal as decision maker theory in practice to diminish over time. The contradiction between the two conflicting theories in practice related to decision making, therefore, was resolved. Teacher Leader Black viewed decision making and influence as reciprocal. "We influence each other." Collective decision-making arose as Principal Bain's strongest decision-making theory in practice related to empowerment

Principal Bain's fourth espoused theory in practice was *accepting personal responsibility* for all decisions and outcomes. Bain perceived it was his job to ensure district directives would be accepted and embraced, "I just don't much believe in saying that we are doing this because somebody said so." In this way, Bain accepted responsibility for the mandates of the district. He publically acknowledged mistakes and collaborated with teachers to align decisions with desired outcomes. Bain's theory in practice regarding accepting personal responsibility aligned with his modeled behaviors.

Three co-constructed theories in practice, a focus on students and using research, collective decision making, and collective responsibility emerged. These exemplified the policy trade-off between empowerment and accountability.

Teacher leaders and Bain possessed a collective *focus on students and using research* to make student-centered decisions. Teachers and Principal Bain placed students' needs first, which created a shared vision. When asked to describe their thinking processes related to making decisions, teacher leaders and Bain unanimously cited their student-centered focus as the

underpinning of all decisions and actions. Bain's thinking and behaviors established the acceptable parameters that teachers emulated in their decision making, which was evident in the core values collectively developed by teachers and Bain. Teacher Leader Fields' posited that teachers embraced a students-first belief, "I think as a school that's what makes our school so good, powerful or you know. I think we all, everybody, put the students first." The focus on students occurred through the lens of research, which created a safety net for teachers to collectively make informed, student-centered decisions.

The second theory in practice, *collective decision making*, emerged because all teachers had a voice in the decision-making process. Teachers and Principal Bain worked together through a variety of formal decision-making groups and informal collaboration. Every teacher served on more than one decision-making body. At some level, every teacher was asked to vote on, reach consensus on, or contribute to a decision. When Principal Bain asked teachers for advice and listened to their suggestions, he acknowledged teachers were essential to school improvement. Teachers serving on teams or committees, as well as individual teachers with expertise, arose as important collective decision makers.

Teacher leaders and Principal Bain also co-developed a theory in practice regarding *accepting responsibility* for schoolwide outcomes by engaging in reflective practices. Principal Bain used reflective practices to engage teachers in discussions about how to improve school outcomes. He did not leave teacher reflection to happenstance; rather, he strategically orchestrated it as he attended team and committee meetings and engaged in discourse with teachers always using two questions: (a) What is working? and (b) What is not working? He modeled reflection when he pondered the ramifications of his decisions and considered ways to approach such situations or decisions in the future. Purposeful reflection was encouraged and modeled by Bain as he attended monthly team meetings. Using questions to prompt reflection about what was going well and what needed refinement, teachers and Bain evolved into a collective and reflective think tank. The explicitness of their reflective practices led to teachers and Bain having a sense of control over their decisions and the corresponding outcomes.

Bain and teacher leaders epitomized the theory: If the flow of influence was interactive and collective and if the principal and teacher leaders merged theories in practice, then the exchange of empowerment for accountability would be operationalized. A seamless link existed among Bain's

three theories in practice related to empowerment and his and teacher leaders' co-developed theories in practice regarding the policy exchange between empowerment and accountability.

Mr. Clark/Syd Lee High School

Principal Clark espoused two theories in practice: (a) building relationships and (b) capitalizing on the reputation of the school. These theories were verified in Clark's behaviors.

Clark's first theory in practice, *relationships*, emerged as his strongest. He maintained a steadfast focus on students and what was best for them. Clark modeled relationship building through his positive interactions with students. Teacher Leader Graham reported, "Mr. Clark is student-centered he insisted that teachers build academic and non-academic relationships with students and he assigned each teacher a group of students and asked that the teacher stays in touch with these students during the school year."

Strong positive relationships also set the stage for Principal Clark to operationalize his second theory in practice of *capitalizing on the reputation of the school*. He used what was available to him (school's reputation) as a way to motivate students and teachers and to accelerate a momentum toward excellence. Teacher leaders confirmed the importance of the school's reputation, "If you haven't been a part of the school system, you don't understand. My husband doesn't understand. He went to Whitney High School, but there is a big tradition here at this school" (T44-81). Syd Lee High School was known across the state as a place of academic and athletic excellence. Clark perceived that much of that reputation was hype. Rather than setting the record straight, Clark exploited the school's excellent reputation for motivating students. During interviews, teacher leaders referenced the school's excellent reputation and strong school spirit; however, not one admitted the reputation was more sentimental than realistic.

Teacher leaders and Principal Clark co-developed two theories in practice that was not articulated by Principal Clark as theories in practice: (a) *informal and formal decision-making* and (b) *collective responsibility*.

Teachers and Principal Clark co-developed two theories in practice: a) decision making and collective responsibility.

Decision making occurred informally and, to a lesser degree, happened formally. Formal structures, such as committees and departments, were established to facilitate collective decision

making. Teacher Leader Jenkins shared, “I think the best way to make decisions is to work with your department and work through your principal. I have never seen a good idea, that was good for kids, not come to reality in this school” (T45-3). Informal decisions often occurred with groups or individuals who were directly impacted by the outcome. Teacher Leader Lashlee described how Principal Clark sought advice and collaborated to make informal decisions: “He may come to my room and say, “Hey, I have got this idea. What do you think about it?”

The second co-constructed theory in practice, *collective responsibility*, manifested in teachers’ accepting responsibility and making the best decisions possible to meet those high expectations associated with the school’s reputation. One teacher, for example, accepted the responsibility for student assessment results that were unrelated to his content area, and he coordinated a plan for students to receive additional instruction in all content areas. This teacher echoed the sentiment of other teachers when he accepted responsibility for the outcomes of all students.

Through shared celebrations of student successes and school awards, Principal Clark and teacher leaders operationalized the second co-constructed theory in practice, collective accountability. Although Principal Clark did not have a personal theory in practice regarding decision making and responsibility, he and teachers had co-developed both. Teachers approached Clark with ideas and suggestions to improve student achievement. The modus operandi were when a teacher or teachers had ideas or suggestions, they approached Clark and discussed those. Teachers also made decisions formally in their departments and on committees and accepted responsibility for schoolwide outcomes.

Cross-Case Analysis

More commonalities than differences surfaced across all four case studies in the theories in practices of principals and those co-developed by teacher leaders and principals. Some differences, however, emerged that highlighted the uniqueness of each school.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

In response to Research Question 1, to what extent were principals espoused theories in practice congruent with modeled behaviors related to empowerment, Table 1 illustrates the theories in practice of principals across all schools.

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Table 1 Principal Theories in Practice

Schools	Relationships	Focus	Decision Making Empowerment	Responsibility
Mt. Pleasant (Bain)		Laser-like focus on students and research	Principal as decision maker and Collective decision makers	Personal responsibility for school outcomes
Columbus (Frances)			Collective decision-making Empowerment	Responsible for schoolwide outcomes
Charles Jefferson (Michaels)	Building relationships between students and adults and among adults			Collective responsibility for schoolwide outcomes
Syd Lee High (Clark)	Relationships improve school outcomes	Capitalizing on the school's reputation of excellence		

No theories in practice were common to all principals, but decision making emerged as a theory in practice for three principals: (a) Bain, (b) Frances, and (c) Michaels. Principal Clark did not have a personal theory in practice regarding decision making.

At Charles Jefferson Elementary School, Principal Michaels' decision-making theory in practice arose as empowerment rather than as collective decision making, because he and teachers made more decisions through interactive venues, such as the use of planning notebooks rather than through team meetings or committee meetings. They engaged in dialogue through their interactive planning notebooks and when Principal Michaels attended meetings to seek input. This differed from Principals Bain and Frances, whose theories in practice regarding decision making were very similar, in that committees and teams made decisions without as much interaction between the principal and teachers. Finally, at Syd Lee High School, Principal Clark had no well-defined theory in practice regarding decision making.

At Columbus Elementary School, Principal Frances' theory in practice that related to decision making provided the most autonomy to teacher leaders; however, teachers questioned Frances' motives for giving away so much power. These hypothesized motives may well have impeded the maturation of other theories in practice.

Two theories in practice shared common attributes: (a) focus on students and (b) relationships with students. Focusing on students surfaced as a theory in practice common to at

least three principals (Bain, Michaels, and Clark). Two principals had stronger relationship theories, while one had a stronger focus on student achievement, yet both theories in practice intersected through a shared vision for student success. At Mt. Pleasant Middle School, for example, Principal Bain's focus on students was sharp and laser-like. It was well-grounded in what was best for students, but he failed to articulate a relationship theory. Rather, he couched his student-centered focus in a theory in practice regarding student outcomes, even though his behavior clearly indicated he valued positive relationships with students, and he articulated the importance of caring about students beyond test scores.

Principal Clark at Syd Lee High School and Principal Michaels at Charles Jefferson Elementary School shared a theory in practice regarding building strong relationships with students. For both principals, these relationships laid the foundation for all other theories – personal and co-developed. Finally, Principal Frances' at Columbus Elementary School demonstrated that he cared about students and had positive relationships with them, but he lacked a clearly defined theory in practice regarding relationships. He failed to articulate a focus on students, even though his behaviors indicated that he interacted positively with students.

The third principal theory in practice was accepting responsibility for student outcomes. Three principals (Bain, Frances, and Michaels) possessed a clearly defined theory in practice grounded in accepting responsibility for school outcomes. Each of these principals participated in self-reflection, conducted data analysis, attended team meetings, or monitored decision making of the collective staff. Only Principal Clark at Syd Lee High School lacked a clearly defined theory in practice regarding accepting responsibility. As principal of the only high school in this study, Principal Clark experienced a set of problems that differed from those experienced by the other three principals who presided over elementary or middle schools. Due to the complexity in Principal Clark's high school master schedule, the large number of teachers and staff members, and the athletic and co-curricular events sponsored after and before school, Principal Clark's choice of focusing on motivation and relationships was evident in his two theories in practice (relationships and capitalizing on the school reputation of excellence). In fact, Principal Clark emerged with the most novel theory in practice of all four principals by using school pride and tradition to motivate students and to compel teachers to set and meet high expectations for students.

Differences, such as Principal Clark capitalizing on the school's reputation of excellence

and Principal Bain’s use of research in his laser-like focus, provided each principal with his unique modus operandi. Differences, however, were less common than similarities. All principals shared common theories in practice. Some theories, such as building relationships with students and a laser-like focus on students, were at times difficult to differentiate between. Each theory was categorized based on the strength of data; however, the lines between the two theories in practice were occasionally blurred.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Table 2 illustrates the similarities and differences among principal and teacher leaders co-developed theories in practice related to the trade-off between empowerment and accountability. Theories in practice co-developed by the principal and teacher leaders shared more similarities across schools than did the principal theories in practice. In response to Research Question 2, to what extent did principal and teacher leaders co-develop clearly defined theories in practice related to the exchange of empowerment for accountability, all four schools had co-developed theories in practice regarding decision making and responsibility. Within each of those theories in practice, however, differences surfaced among schools.

Table 2. Theories in Practice of Teacher Leaders

Schools	Relationships	Focus	Decision Making-Empowerment	Responsibility
Mt. Pleasant		Focus on students	Collective decision maker	Collective responsibility
Columbus			Collective decision-making	Individual responsibility
Charles Jefferson	Relationships between students and adults and among adults		Empowerment	Collective responsibility for schoolwide outcomes
Syd Lee High		Creating a student-centered school and Capitalizing on reputation of excellence	Formal and informal decision-making	Collective responsibility

Teacher leaders and the principals at all four schools co-developed theories in practice regarding decision making. At Columbus Elementary School, more collective decision making

occurred than at any other school. Teachers had more autonomy in decision-making at Columbus Elementary than at any other school. Principal Frances, however, did not provide a similar level of oversight and monitoring to the collective decision-making process, as did Principal Michaels at Charles Jefferson Elementary and Principal Bain at Mt. Pleasant Middle School. One difference between decision-making at Columbus Elementary School and the other three schools was the lack of involvement by Principal Frances. The large array of different groups who made decisions and the number of decisions coming from each entity may have impeded Frances's involvement in making a decision, reflecting with teachers, and monitoring.

At Charles Jefferson Elementary School and Mt. Pleasant Middle School, decision making was collective; but Principals Michaels and Bain had active and strategic roles, such as monitoring, assisting, facilitating meetings, posing provocative questions, and providing feedback. At Syd Lee High School, Principal Clark was involved in most decision making, even though it lacked the collectivity of the larger group, which may have been inherent in a high school configuration. In the informal settings where most decisions were made at Syd Lee High School, Clark asked questions and played a major role in refining ideas before decisions were made. Decision-making at Syd Lee High School was collective, but it was typically informal and only involved a few teachers and the principal at one time. Decision makers changed at Syd Lee High School each time a different teacher or group of teachers approached Principal Clark, making that group the primary decision makers for that particular idea.

Although some monitoring occurred at Columbus Elementary School, it was not as strategically used as it was at Mt. Pleasant Middle School and Charles Jefferson Elementary School. Both Bain and Michaels used monitoring and reflection as a tool to interact with teacher leaders about their decisions and the consequences of those decisions. Principal Clark at Syd Lee High School engaged teachers in reflection and questioning during decision making but did not formally monitor outcomes from decisions as rigorously as did Mt. Pleasant Middle School and Charles Jefferson Elementary School principals. Columbus Elementary School differed from the other three schools in that principal involvement was less apparent in decision making, which most likely resulted because there were so many different groups of teachers making decisions that Frances could not possibly attend or participate in all of them.

The second co-developed theory in practice that surfaced in every school relates to an

acceptance of responsibility for student outcomes. The staff at every school claimed to accept responsibility for student outcomes to some degree. However, collective responsibility, where most staff members believed they were responsible for student outcomes schoolwide, occurred most strongly at Charles Jefferson Elementary School.

Both Syd Lee High School and Mt. Pleasant Middle School teacher leaders and principals had co-developed theories regarding collective responsibility, but no school demonstrated a theory in practice related to accepting responsibility for schoolwide outcomes to the same extent as the teachers at Charles Jefferson Elementary School. Teachers at Charles Jefferson Elementary School operationalized this theory in practice routinely by teaching at different grade levels to help students prepare for the state assessment, celebrating the successes of all students together, reflecting on their decisions and actions through planning notebooks, and soliciting feedback on their thoughts from Principal Michaels.

At Syd Lee High School, teacher leaders and Principal Clark co-developed a theory in practice regarding accepting responsibility, which manifested in the relationships between teachers and students. Teachers developing strong relationships with students may have encouraged the development of a sense of responsibility for students outside their classrooms. In addition, teachers celebrating the success of all students may have contributed to their strong sense of responsibility for schoolwide outcomes. Celebrating student successes together encouraged staff to view themselves as a unit of one.

At three schools, teacher leaders and the principals co-developed theories in practice regarding a focus on students or relationships with students. The principal and teacher leaders at Mt. Pleasant Middle School and at Syd Lee High School each co-developed a theory in practice regarding a student-centered focus. At Charles Jefferson Elementary School, building relationships with students was a priority. No student-centered focus or priority on relationships emerged as a theory in practice at Columbus Elementary School.

Charles Jefferson Elementary School and Mt. Pleasant Middle School operationalized the exchange between empowerment and accountability through co-developed theories in practice. Syd Lee High School shared similar theories in practice, but the sheer size of the school loomed as a barrier for collectivity to form across the entire faculty. The faculty met so rarely that decision-making groups took unique forms. The social studies department, for example, had to meet

informally, because it had an abundance of coaches on staff. The difficulty in scheduling meetings conducive to everyone's schedule often forced the department chair to poll teachers for department decisions rather than hold formal meetings. At Columbus Elementary School collective decision making was operationalized, yet without collective responsibility supporting that decision making, the exchange of empowerment for accountability hypothesized by this researcher did not reach fruition.

Teacher leaders and the principal at Charles Jefferson Elementary co-developed a theory in practice related to relationships with students. At two schools (Mt. Pleasant Middle and Syd Lee High), teacher leaders and the principal co-developed a student-centered theory in practice. Syd Lee High School teacher leaders also mirrored Principal Clark's focus on the reputation of the school. At all four schools, teacher leaders embraced theories in practice for decision making and responsibility, but, at Columbus Elementary School, the responsibility differed from the others in that it emerged as individual rather than collective.

In response to Research Question 1, to what extent were principal espoused theories in practice congruent with modeled behaviors related to empowerment, three of the four principals espoused theories in practice that aligned to their modeled behaviors regarding empowerment and accountability.

CONCLUSION

In three schools where principals espoused theories in action and behaviors were congruent and focused on students, principal behaviors provided teachers with models to emulate. Researchers found while teacher empowerment occurred in one school, it did not translate into teachers accepting responsibility as a collective group. Rather, as a result of teachers perceiving Principal Frances as detached from decision making, collective responsibility failed to emerge. In the three schools where collective decision making occurred with principal involvement and monitoring, collective accountability occurred thereby operationalizing the policy trade-off of empowerment for accountability.

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