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THROUGH THEIR EYES: FIVE MAINE PRINCIPALS EXPLORE THEIR  
LEARNING ABOUT LEADERSHIP

By

Anita M. Campbell

B.S. University of Maine at Presque Isle, 1969

M.Ed. University of Southern Maine, 1983

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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(in Educational Leadership)

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December 2003

Advisory Committee:

Gordon A. Donaldson Jr., Professor of Education, Advisor

David Brown, Associate Professor of Education

Dianne Hoff, Assistant Professor of Education

Sarah Mackenzie, Assistant Professor of Education

George Marnik, Assistant Professor of Education

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr.

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
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Rising expectations for school leadership are placing unprecedented pressures on school principals. No longer able to limit their work to the traditional management functions, principals must now lead the improvement of student achievement, staff learning, and community involvement. Given the consuming nature of the principalship, principals have a variety of learning needs.

The literature on principals' learning is weighted with prescriptions written by those outside the principalship. Absent from this literature is the voice of the principal himself or herself. The purpose of this research was to explore principals' learning needs "from the inside out" in order to understand what forms of learning are most meaningful to practicing principals.

The researcher interviewed five women middle school principals in Maine using a series of three interviews and a demographic questionnaire. Data were collected that addressed four research questions as follows:

1. What do principals feel they need to learn?
2. What do principals say about how they learn?

3. How do principals identify meaningful learning experiences?
4. What impact has principals' learning had upon their practice?

The research revealed a tension between principals' expressed learning needs and persistent difficulty in pursuing them. Principals' learning needs fell into five categories: Technology, assessment, building projects, school safety, and relationships.

Principals expressed a preference for learning opportunities that could immediately inform their work in their schools. However, several obstacles stood in the way: little time for learning, little support from their districts, and dissatisfaction with one or two-day conferences that took them away from their schools. These Maine principals, on the other hand, found that the learning that happened within the building with staff was often the most meaningful. This form of collaborative learning seemed to combine two critical elements: building stronger working relationships with staff while developing new ways to meet the needs of students.

This research suggests that principals advocate for their own learning by seeking opportunities to engage and reflect with staff in relevant and professional venues. Accepting a different way of addressing principals' professional learning needs may require that school districts and learning institutions think "outside the box" as they seek to meet the needs of principals in today's schools.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .....	1
Introduction .....	1
The Problem .....	2
Organization of the Study .....	5
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	8
Overview .....	8
The Learning Needs of Early School Leaders .....	8
Principals' Perceived Learning Needs .....	12
Learning Needs from the Outside Looking In .....	12
Principals' Expressed Learning Needs .....	14
How Principals Learn .....	18
Principals Learning through Collaboration and Reflection .....	18
Principals Share How They Learn Best .....	23
Needs of Adult Learners .....	26
Summary .....	30
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN .....	31
Overview .....	31
Data Collection .....	33
Selection of Participants .....	35
The Interviews .....	36
Interview #1 .....	37

Interview #2 .....	38
Interview #3 .....	39
Analysis and Presentation of The Data .....	39
Validity and Trustworthiness .....	41
CHAPTER 4: PRINCIPALS TALK ABOUT THEIR LEARNING .....	43
Overview .....	43
An Introduction to the Principals .....	43
The Principals: A Closer Look .....	45
Principals' Recent Learning Experiences .....	50
Principals Share Their Learning Needs .....	54
Technology .....	55
Assessment .....	57
Building Projects .....	59
Safety .....	61
Relationships .....	62
Summary of Learning Needs of Each Principal .....	64
Alignment of Identified Learning Needs to Actual Experiences .....	67
How Principals Learn Best .....	70
Learning with Others .....	71
Conditions for Learning: Support .....	74
Summary of How Principals Learn Best .....	79
CHAPTER 5: PRINCIPALS TALK ABOUT MEANINGFUL LEARNING AND EVIDENCE OF LEARNING .....	82

Overview .....	82
Valuable Learning Experiences .....	83
Summary .....	89
Barriers to Learning .....	90
Expectations of Staff and Parents .....	90
Being Present in the School .....	93
The Overlap of School to Home .....	95
Impact of Principals' Learning .....	98
Artifacts Representing Organizational Structure .....	98
Tangible Artifacts of Principals' Learning .....	101
Summary .....	105
CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY .....	107
Overview .....	107
The Problem Revisited .....	107
The Research Design .....	108
Findings .....	112
Introduction to Themes .....	116
Honoring the Learning That is Embedded in the Work.....	117
Principals' Struggle to Reflect Upon Their Learning .....	120
Acknowledging the Challenges of the Principal's Role .....	123
Recommendations .....	125
References .....	129
APPENDICES .....	135

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire .....	136
Appendix B: Interview Protocol #1 .....	137
Appendix C: Interview Protocol #2 .....	139
Appendix D: Interview Protocol #3 .....	140
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form .....	141
Appendix F: Human Subjects Form .....	145
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR .....	148



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1	Participant Data .....	44
Table 4.2	Recently Attended Learning Events .....	52
Table 4.3	Identified Needs and Actual Learning .....	68
Table 5.1	Learning Preferences .....	89

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Introduction

#### Wanted: Exceptional School Leaders

Must know how to implement change that helps ensure the academic success of all students. Must be an instructional leader and have the ability to promote teacher growth. Must be dedicated to creating a shared vision of an outstanding school through collaboration with faculty, parents, and community members. Must have strong interpersonal skills, excellent communication skills.

This advertisement represents the focal point of an article in an ASCD publication (Volume 42, Number 3, May 2000) that speaks to the increasingly complex and demanding expectations of school principals. Maine principals are no exception for never before has there been such a varied and diverse set of expectations placed at the feet of Maine's school leaders. Today, whenever there is a gathering of Maine school principals, conversations inevitably drift to the difficulty of fulfilling the expectations of moving the school agenda forward while attending to the endless details that are inherent to the position. As a staff member and director of the Maine Principals' Academy for 10 years, I consistently heard participants of the Academy engage in formal and informal conversations about the frustrations that emerge from balancing the role of manager and educational leader. The corridors of the Maine Principals' Association fall conference were littered with similar conversations as colleagues and I talked about how to balance the demands of the position while continuing to learn and grow as an effective educational leader.

## The Problem

Effectively balancing the role of the manager and the role of the school leader is a challenging responsibility for today's school principal. School principals are expected to be up to speed regarding educational trends and understand how to impart that information to staff. They are expected to embrace change while supporting staff and students in the process. In addition, they are expected to reflect upon their practice to determine how to improve upon their work as they guide and support staff, students and community toward a preferred future. Meeting the managerial expectations of the position while accepting the responsibilities of an educational leader represents the tension inherent in the principal's role in today's schools as principals juggle the expectations of their position.

Balancing the managerial components of the principal's position while learning to be an effective school leader is no easy task as the responsibilities of principals have increased significantly over time. Research indicates that the principalship has changed dramatically since its inception (Barth, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1992; Fullan, 1998; Hausman & Sperry, 2000; Murphy, 1992). Murphy (1992) indicates that the learning of the first school leaders, many of whom were teaching principals, was conducted on a 'need-to-know' basis, for the responsibilities consisted primarily of managerial tasks. School leaders expected the teachers in their buildings to follow a linear, rational model of teaching that was influenced by the tenets of Frederick Taylor among others. Teachers were able to close the door to their classrooms and expect little interference from the principal who was completing the budget and making sure the furnace continued functioning. In 1958, the most pressing need identified by principals was the addition of

more clerical support to help manage the details of the position (The National Elementary Principal, Vol. XXXVIII, No.1, Sept. 1958). According to Murphy (1992), little attention was paid to the expressed learning needs of principals during their preparation programs or as they continued to balance the responsibilities of the role.

Prior to the mid-1980's, the reform movement that swept across the educational landscape left educational administration largely untouched. As late as 1985 [Peter and Finn reported]...at a time when the nation is deeply concerned about the performance of its schools, and near-to-obsessed with the credential and careers of those who teach in them, scant attention has been paid to the preparation and qualifications of those who lead them (p. 12).

Today's school leaders require a "whole new set of skills" to be able to sustain the work of successful school leader while immersed in the myriad responsibilities of the position (Barth, 1995). As Schon (1987) indicated, the learning needs of today's principals are increasingly complex, and even ambiguous; principals' responsibilities include learning how to develop the budget, spearhead curriculum and instruction initiatives, relate effectively with staff and mediate with students, parents, and teachers. Schon indicated that school principals are expected to manage the work of schools while responding to increasingly higher standards. They proposed that the necessary skills that the effective school principal is expected to have include maintaining a balance between:

1. being decisive and building consensus;
2. embracing values and maintaining tolerance;
3. exercising productive power and empowering others;

4. being firm and caring about others, and
5. remaining concerned about the bottom line while supporting creativity.

This list reflects a tension for principals as they are expected to manage schools by being decisive, productive, and firm while paying attention to the bottom line and maintaining a level of effective leadership that promotes consensus, tolerance, empowerment, caring and creativity. School principals are being required to stretch their capacity to fulfill the many, varied expectations of the position (Donaldson, 1997; Richard, 2000). Richards indicated that:

Part of the concern about the principalship stems from the typical building leader's long list of duties... Principals are faced with performing age-old managerial roles such as coordinating buses, attending events, and handling discipline. At the same time, however, they are expected to play an expanded role in monitoring instruction, guiding teachers, and planning for effective professional development. (p. 5)

The purpose of this research is to explore Maine principals' learning from the principals' point of view as they strive to balance the demands of position, the challenges of effective leadership and their specific learning needs as they move schools forward in a manner that provides meaningful education for Maine students. The research will focus on what principals feel they need to learn, how they learn best, and what they identify as meaningful learning within the context of work as they accept the responsibility of school leader. It is hoped that the examination of principals' learning needs will provide a realistic view of the expectations and responsibilities of the role as principals serve as the educational leaders for our schools.

Relatively little research has been conducted that focuses on how the demands of the principals' role impact principals' leadership and learning. As Schon (1987) indicated, the problems that real-world principals encounter in their practice do not easily translate into clearly defined solutions. Attempts to generalize principals' needs may lose sight of the unique demands of each principal's setting. The literature would benefit from an exploration of principals' needs based on the realities that they experience on a daily basis.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter I provides the reader with a snapshot of the framework for understanding the purpose of this study. This research was conducted for the purpose of developing insights into how principals regard their learning needs given the increased expectations of the position. Principals were asked to talk about their specific learning needs, their preferred learning environments, and what they consider to be meaningful learning. The final section of this first chapter provides the reader with a snapshot of the content and process of this research.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to present a review of the current literature used to support this dissertation. Contained in this chapter is an overview of the literature pertaining to the evolving role of the principal as defined by early expectations and societal influences. In addition, the chapter contains a review of some current professional development initiatives for school leaders, particularly those initiatives that give school leaders the opportunity to work with others in a collaborative setting. This chapter also contains an overview of the needs of adult learners touching briefly on the needs of women learners given that the study is comprised of five women.

Chapter 3 summarizes the methodology used to conduct this study. It defines the goals of the research, including four central questions that served as a focus for the interviews with principals. Specifically, the goal of this research was to explore the following questions:

1. What do principals feel they need to learn?
2. What do principals say about how they learn?
3. How do principals identify meaningful learning experiences?
4. What impact has principals' learning had upon their practice?

In addition, a detailed account of the research design, data collection procedures and validity issues are included.

The next two chapters speak to the heart of the research, as they contain data collected from research participants. In Chapter 4, the reader is introduced to each participant as principals share their learning priorities. Participants' responses are organized by research question, giving a descriptive account of participants' points of view and individual and collective perceptions. In this chapter, principals identify specific learning needs and talk about how they learn best as they pursue those needs.

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to explore what principals identify as meaningful learning experiences and how their learning has influenced their schools. The reader will develop a sense of the challenges and frustrations of principals as they reflect upon the balance between their work and their learning. In addition, the impact of principals' learning on their schools is contained in this chapter as the data reflects how principals struggle with identification of artifacts that represent their learning.

Chapter 6 will examine the alignment between what participants say about their learning needs and the reality of their learning experiences. The final chapter will contain an analysis of the research findings that include an exploration of the emergent themes contained in the data and an examination of the implications, if any, that influence principals' learning. In addition, recommendations will be made to those individuals and organizations that provide learning opportunities to principals regarding the development of effective initiatives that might meet principals' needs, concluding with a brief section that suggests topics for future research.



## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Overview

This chapter explores the research literature regarding the evolution of school leaders as defined by the expectations of the role and the influences of the times. It also examines both historical and current learning initiatives that have been developed to enhance the learning of school leaders, and as schools evolved, principals. Also included in this chapter is an exploration of the research regarding the expressed learning needs of school principals. Finally, the learning needs of adults are examined which includes a brief section regarding women's learning needs.

### The Learning Needs of Early School Leaders

Early school leaders were expected to manage their schools. The concept of being a school leader who was responsible for the effectiveness of teachers and students was an unexplored topic. Prior to 1940, academic programs for school leaders had school superintendents in mind, not principals, for the critical role of the principal would not be a focus until the early 1980s. In addition, many such programs were designed only to prepare school leaders, not augment their skills once they had assumed the role. As Daresh and Playko (1992) indicated, school leaders were expected to acquire knowledge that related to administrative tasks and responsibilities. In essence, early school leadership development programs were designed for individuals who were on the outside looking in (Wimpelberg, 1990) or who had not yet assumed the position of school leader. This overview provided the backdrop for an initial examination of the leader as learner.

Formal training for school leaders was an unrecognized component of school organization (Murphy, 1992), as early schools of the pre-1900's were simple

organizations where administrators could learn by trial and error as they applied philosophical knowledge to schools. According to Kowalski & Reitzug (1993), early “head teachers” who became known as principals “relied on common sense and innate abilities to perform largely management-related tasks” (p. 7).

The beliefs of Taylor and Weber helped shape the perceived learning needs of school administrators as they prepared to become school leaders. Learning was viewed as linear and rational; the theories of these men dominated the educational arena through the industrial revolution and beyond (Murphy, 1992; Hollomon, 1999). Murphy & Forsyth (1999) wrote that a belief that permeated the training of school leaders from the 1900s to 1945 was that an emphasis on simple and sound business principles would create effective school administrators.

The post-war 1950s brought great excitement and enthusiasm to school administration. A spirit of inquiry prevailed that mirrored the optimism and prosperity of the times. A journal article in a 1958 edition of *The National Elementary Principal* (in Murphy, 1992), ten years after the end of World War II, indicated that principals were just beginning to be regarded as professionals. Despite this attitudinal change, the training of school leaders adhered to a traditional model. According to research (Darling-Hammond, 1992; Murphy, 1992), the professional development of school principals in this period evolved into a ‘deficit model’ that viewed principals as empty vessels that needed to be filled as determined by either someone or something other than the expressed needs of the principal. This one-size-fits-all approach of addressing principals’ learning needs accepted the notion that there was one method of ‘being’ an administrator (Murphy, 1992; Hollomon, 1999). It was believed that repeating the same rituals but more intensely would somehow improve the results, that pre-determined solutions existed

for identified problems (Osterman, 1995; Hollomon, 1999, Milstein, 1993). According to Allison (1996), administrative problems could be resolved by selecting and initiating appropriate decision-making models. Murphy (1992) indicated that the gap between training programs and the realities of the role of the school leader continued to widen during post-war years, for the focus of these training programs continued to be focused on preparation and not enhancement of skills based on school leaders' needs.

Prior to 1960, the preparation for school principals had been, according to Lambert (1987), based on a fallacy that accepted the existence of an effective school curriculum. However, by 1960 leaders of school administration preparation programs were raising concerns regarding the connection of the traditional knowledge base to practice, the lack of rigorous program standards, and the disregard of the varying learning characteristics of students who were enrolled in programs (Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996; Murphy, 1999).

Research (Ginty, 1995, Murphy & Forsyth, 1999) indicated that as the role of the school leader, including principals, became viewed as part of the professional realm, the number of training programs for school leaders expanded. These programs viewed educational administration as an applied science and began to offer a variety of coursework options that reflected more theory and less practice. It was during this time that school administrators began expressing a need to receive training beyond their preparation program that provided them with skills and strategies to help them manage the realities of the position and to help their students gain skills that translated theory into practice. During this era the Committee for the Awareness of School Administrators

(CASA) was established to begin to examine areas of certification and professional accreditation for school administrators.

The 1970s and 1980s reflected a climate that promoted self-actualization and societal reforms. It was during this time that the Effective Schools movement identified the characteristics of successful schools, pinpointing the principal as crucial to school success (Edmonds, 1980). The publishing of the document *A Nation at Risk* (1983) followed on the heels of this initiative, spearheading the move toward school effectiveness and accountability (Crow, 1993). Intense dialogues were beginning to take place regarding school restructuring and reform. This agenda has helped call attention to the need for effective learning opportunities for school administrators.

The school reform movement provided a forum from which to examine the evolving learning needs of school administrators. Policy makers began to recognize that to improve schools, school leadership must change, which led to an examination of how to bring about the kinds of changes that were necessary to effectively impact schools (Walker, Mitchel, & Turner, 1999; Osterman, 1995; Aitken, 1992, Milstein, 1993). Initiatives regarding curriculum assessment and accountability overlaid by state directives have helped bring the learning needs of school principals to the forefront. However, as Robertson (1997) contended, “the rhetoric of reform” consisting of phrases like appraisal, efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, achievement objectives, and performance outcomes seemed at odds with the developing leadership theory which used words such as “building a community of learners” and “working collaboratively” (p. 6).

## Principals' Perceived Learning Needs

The determination of what school principals require to support their learning needs has not been an easy task for the principals' roles and responsibilities have altered significantly since Frederick Taylor's business principles were introduced into schools. However, the professional development of principals was able to move beyond the one-size-fits-all model as principals began to raise concerns regarding program standards and varying student needs (Darling-Hammond, 1992). The following sections reviews principals' learning needs from two points of view. The first sections examined the needs of principals as determined by groups or individuals who did not hold the position of principal, thus examining the perceived needs from the outside in. The next section represented a view from the inside out as principals shared the learning that best matched their needs as they were immersed in the job.

### Learning Needs from the Outside Looking In

As Hausman, Crow, & Sperry (2000) indicated, principals are being constantly bombarded by experts telling them what effective principals should be learning. (2001) indicated, "Recent efforts in school reform have focused more attention on the professional development of teachers than on the learning needs of school leaders, especially principals, who direct the process of change" (p. 75). Theorists, consultants, and education associations have rushed in to fill the gap, offering principals a plethora of strategies to enhance their success (Fullan, 1998). Recent state and local reform initiatives have forced principals to be knowledgeable about the concerns of the community, including drug abuse and family violence, the values, norms, and patterns of behavior within the school, and reform issues that include shared decision-making,

accountability, and school choice (Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 2000). A position paper generated by the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (2000) developed a list of topics of which the association expected principals to have working knowledge that included student achievement, school safety, curriculum and instruction, data-driven research, and school-community partnerships. A recent edition of *Educational Leadership* (March 2003) was devoted to articles that implied that, in order to be effective, principals should learn about the following issues:

- How to create a school community by being visible and accessible to staff and students.
- How to introduce character education, how to support community service learning projects.
- How to create a respectful, responsible classroom management program.

Books, journals, and conferences are filled with suggestions about what principals should learn to enhance their effectiveness. College and university classrooms continue to offer prescribed curricula to meet the perceived needs of principals. However, as Hausman, Crow, & Sperry (2000) and Whitaker & Turner (2000) indicate, what is missing is a focus on the learning needs of the principal based upon the principals' specific position, personal context and values. The authors contended that there is no uniform way to meet the learning needs of principals. They said that, "context influences the demands on principal's time, the range of possibilities for reform, and a host of other constraints and opportunities that...define the principal's role" (p. 5). However, not only do institutions and policy makers need to consider principals' realities as they develop initiatives to meet their needs. In addition, the authors added that principals must be "true

to themselves” (p. 11) as they select learning opportunities that match what they value and how they lead, for taking care of identified needs keep principals “energized and efficacious” (p. 11).

### Principals’ Expressed Learning Needs

Barth (1990) shared that school leaders cannot be serious agents of change by responding to someone else’s vision for what should be done. As principals examine their unique positions, how do their personal visions for their schools influence their learning needs? As indicated, opinions abound regarding the learning needs of school principals as identified by those who are not doing the work. However, there are fewer studies that report what principals identify as their learning needs. The following section reviews six studies that asked principals, specifically, what they needed to learn. The studies are reported individually, as attempting to combine their major points may lose sight of the impact of each study, much as the reporting of each study takes away from the needs of individuals within the study.

Research conducted by Neufeld (1997) indicated that urban principals collectively identified their needs as follows:

1. understanding context and conditions of practice;
2. using resources effectively;
3. collecting and managing information for decision-making;
4. establishing climate;
5. affecting change;
6. governance;

7. managing instructional diversity, and
8. motivating students to learn.

Having identified a list of subjects that reflected a commonality of needs, these practicing principals qualified the results of their work by indicating that programs offering new learning needed to be unique and relevant to each setting. This view was supported by research indicating that principals should be in charge of their own professional development because the needs of principals are so varied (Aitken, 1992; Allison 1996; Robertson, 1997; Donaldson & Marnik, 1995). Aitken (1992) suggested that in-service models for professional development support increased principal involvement and address the needs of adult learners.

Allison's research (1996) reflected the "lived realities" of principals. Principals were asked to identify problems that existed in their respective sites. However, principals in this study preferred to discuss workable, practical strategies that could be implemented in their work. The principals identified the following topics by level of priority: (1) specifics dealing with the "nuts and bolts" details associated with each school (2) relationships, and (3) philosophical issues. The most discussed topic in the last category was "creating a climate for change" (p. 25). In a study conducted by Walker, Mitchel, & Turner (1999), the need to explore the practical issues of the principal's role was cited as well. The expressed needs of administrators fell within four categories: (1) relational issues (2) instructional supervision (3) meeting situational exigencies and (4) basic administrative function.



Concerns regarding the changing learning needs of principals were expressed by respondents of surveys conducted by Goddard (1997). Principals identified the following areas of interest for professional development: (1) school management, (2) community involvement, (3) personnel issues, (4) technology, and (5) assessment. Principals also expressed concern about how to balance regional mandates with the increased responsibilities of the position. The principals in this study recommended that professional development opportunities be aligned to the changing role of the principalship. In addition, principals expressed a reluctance to leave their buildings indicating that professional development offerings needed to match their unique needs. It is interesting to note that only one study recognized a need to include a “grounding of feminine leadership characteristics” (p. 12) in professional development offerings (Goddard, 1997), suggesting that an awareness be developed regarding women’s leadership.

Walker, Mitchel, & Turner (1999) followed the progress of participants in a principal leadership institute that was established in collaboration with eight universities. Each principal and assistant principal was assigned to one of eight cohorts that were linked to one of the eight universities. The study indicated that professional development needs were difficult to define as the expectations of principals kept changing. Respondents added that decreasing resources influenced what they might identify as their needs as well as the lack of enough time to meet increasing demands of the position. A strength of the program, participants indicated, was the level of support and collaboration that existed within the cohort structure. However, participants recognized a disconnect between the cohort activities and their identified needs, indicating that they valued useful

and practical knowledge that could be implemented in their respective settings.

Participants suggested that cohort themes incorporate the expressed needs of group in a manner that legitimized their values and beliefs.

A case study of six elementary principals (2000) indicated that principals valued learning about topics that were aligned to the needs within their schools. Principals expressed the desire to attend national conferences to stay current with developments in curriculum and instruction, but rarely have the time or resources to do so. (2000) indicated that, “Principals have a limited time for their own learning, so they often focus only on what they need to know to keep up with practices in their school or district” (p. 76).

In a study by Neufeld (1997), 42 middle level principals were asked to identify areas in which they lacked knowledge or needed additional strategies. An analysis of the transcribed data revealed that principals consistently identified the following needs:

- creating a respectful, collaborative, collegial school culture;
- understanding, implementing, and assessing newly proposed approaches to teaching and learning, and
- remaining up-to-date on organizational, legal, financial and technological issues.

In a study of 492 Maine principals (Donaldson, Buckingham, & Coladarci, 2003), respondents indicated that their top priority was to “respond to people” (p. 20) and lead the instructional program. Although this study was not focused on the specific learning needs of principals, it reinforced principals’ expressed priorities.

Based on the examination of these studies, it is interesting to note that the common feature in what principals identified as necessary to learn was rarely focused on specific topics. However, principals frequently mentioned the necessity of developing an effective climate and culture within the school. In addition, they expressed the need to have their learning support their work (Marnik, 1997). These are important considerations as they serve as a reminder to view principals learning needs on a case-by-case basis, keeping each principal's unique experience in mind. Research indicates (Barth 1995; Donaldson, 1997; Fullan, 1998; Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 1998; Marnik, 1997; Wimpelberg 1990) that the challenge is to address the needs of principals within the context of their respective settings rather than rely on the creation of a general picture of principals' perceived needs.

### How Principals Learn

As Walker, Mitchel, & Turner (1999) and Daresh (1997) indicated, program development for school leaders should be viewed as more than a collection of courses, grades, and credits on a transcript. This section examines how principals learn as it explores the variety of learning opportunities available to school leaders. This section also reviews what principals have shared about how they learn as they confront the roles and responsibilities of their positions.

### Principals' Learning through Collaboration and Reflection

Milstein (1993) suggested that, "Even a casual observer of the reform scene over the past decade must realize that the demand for change and improvement in the education of coming generations represents a significant and unprecedented challenge to our educational system" (p. vii). Currently, principals are being encouraged to attend to

their learning needs in a manner that transcends traditional coursework offered at colleges and universities. Principals are surrounded by learning opportunities that feature collaborative settings and reflective practice. Barth (1995) said that:

The logic is not complicated: if we can devise ways to help principals reflect thoughtfully and systemically upon the work they do, analyze that work, clarify their thinking through spoken and written articulation and engage in conversations with others about that work, they will better understand their complex school, the tasks confronting them, and their own styles as leaders (p. 22).

Marsick (1987) indicated that the marrying of the realities of practice and the use of reflection through the development of cohort models represents a way to look differently at the learning of school leaders, for it suggests a level of professional collaboration between and among school principals. He advocated this 'thinking outside the box' approach when he said that the process of learning is more than a set of technical skills. In addition to the traditional models of professional development offered by colleges, universities, and a variety of in-service initiatives, cohort structures where school leaders collaborate to share and reflect upon their experiences represent a new approach to providing learning opportunities for practitioners. Representative Maine programs that reflect this model include the Maine Principals' Academy, which has served school leaders for over 20 years, and the recently developed Maine School Leadership Network. Each of these programs is based on the self-identified needs of school leaders that are addressed in a collaborative setting. As Heifetz (1994) indicated, "Leadership cannot be exercised alone, (for this is) heroic suicide. Each of us has blind spots that require the vision of others" (p. 268).

According to research (Barth, 1995; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Marnik, 1997; McCay, 2002), new learning is enhanced by the development of collaborative, collegial learning environments that foster trust, caring and support. Group skills such as commitment to goals, promotion of cooperation, conflict resolution and the processing of information are actively promoted in a collaborative atmosphere. When school leaders have the opportunity to collaborate on common issues, leadership is viewed as a consensual task that builds on a sharing of ideas and a sharing of responsibility (Basom, 1996; Marnik, 1997; McCafferty, 1996; Daresh, 1997). McCune (in Basom, 1996) characterized collaborative learning as “understanding the reciprocal nature of leadership, leadership as an interaction among members of a group, leadership as a collaborative activity, leadership as a stewardship, and leadership as a means of dealing with the increased rate of change.” (p. 100). Heifetz (1994) indicated that group members can serve as a “hedge against self-deception” (p. 272) for they promote self-examination in a supportive, collegial setting.

Marsick (1987) wrote, “Learning calls for a flexible capacity for continual reflection on one’s actions and at times, for critical reflection, that is digging beneath the surface to examine taken-for-granted assumptions, norms, and values” (p.9). Principals learn more about their work when opportunities for reflection are utilized, for reflection is the foundation and backdrop for principals’ learning (Lambert, 1987).

Frequent contact among administrators has been acknowledged to be a necessary component of effective professional development (Walker, Mitchel, & Turner, 1999; Aitken, 1992). Principals value the opportunity to build relationships and rapport with other principals in a trusting environment (Aitken, 1992; Allison, 1996; Marnik, 1997;

Donaldson & Marnik, 1995; Walker, Mitchel & Turner, 1999). In addition, principals value collaboration with colleagues that gives them the opportunity to discuss ideas with other professionals who offer a fresh perspective on individual challenges (Robertson, 1997; Walker, Mitchel, & Turner, 1999). As Sergiovani (1999) indicated, professional development initiatives that are based on a collaborative model and encourage principals to work together toward the solution of common concerns are most closely aligned to meeting the needs of principals.

Research supported reflection as a means of changing behavior as principals examine assumptions that guide patterns of response (Heifetz, 1994; Osterman, 1995; Robertson, 1997; Donaldson & Marnik, 1995). Principals' examination of their daily actions, successes, and challenges helps to build the capacity to learn from mistakes so that they are not repeated. Taking the time not only to reflect upon personal challenges but also share that reflection with a colleague achieves praxis, for it is a vehicle that promotes integrated thinking and behavioral change (Galbraith, 1991). When principals become reflective practitioners, they step into their problems, framing and then re-framing them depending on what the data tells them, and seek solutions in collaboration with others (Galbraith, 1991; Hollomon, 1999).

McCay (2001) indicated that principals should be exploring new ways of connecting theory and practice by focusing on active learning, reflection, and leadership in a collegial setting. She added that principals need to become active in their own learning as they link knowledge and identified needs, for thoughtful, individualized planning works best. Interaction with colleagues, either formally or informally, enhances the learning for "it's the impromptu discussions that really put a situation in perspective"

(p. 76). As Brown & Irby (2001) indicated, reflection without action is only a daydream as principals should make it a priority to seek out activities that challenge their beliefs and make time to share their new learning with colleagues. The key to being successful in the principalship, says Fullan (1998) is mobilizing people to tackle school problems in a collaborative manner. Fullan referred to the mindful collaboration of colleagues as a form of professional self-development as he advocated shared conversations of common issues.

Successful leaders are perpetual learners (Robbins & Harvey, 1995; Barth, 1995). Barth (1995) indicated that principals must be “visible” (p. 3) learners as they model the pursuit of learning that is sincere, consistent, and purposeful. He added that this is no easy task, for keeping the “professional candle” (p. 2) lit while doing the job is a very real challenge particularly if the principal is working alone. He continued by saying that purposefully pursuing learning needs include finding a mentor with whom to share the work and keeping a portfolio that reflects and records professional growth along with the artifacts that represent them (p.3).

Payne and Wolfson (2000) said, “We need to create our own opportunities for professional growth through institutionalizing professional interaction, reflection, and readings” (p. 261). Principals who value staying abreast of current trends in education and student learning must purposefully read professional books and journals, attend conferences and professional meetings and actively pursue opportunities for professional growth. Barth (1995) said that principals must recognize the responsibility of pursuing new knowledge as they assume the position of lead learner in their schools and as they model what it means to be a life-long learner.

Advocating reflection as a critical tool of professional development suggests that principals take responsibility for their own learning (Osterman, 1995; Ginty, 1995). Learning takes place when individuals are personally engaged in the learning process and work to develop a sense of self, for it is through self-discovery that principals begin to understand how their personal characteristics impact their professional performance. According to Argyris (in Robertson, 1997), principals need to be asking, "What am I doing? Why am I doing this? What effect do my actions have on children's learning" (p. 6). Principals as learners develop a culture of inquiry that fosters conversations and challenges that evolve with continued introspection. As Sergiovanni (1995) admonished, any attempts to improve performance and achievement in our schools will depend on the willingness of administrators to improve their own learning. Murphy (1992) indicated that the individuals needs of the people who are doing the work must be considered before professional development models are established.

#### Principals Share How They Learn Best

Research regarding how principals learn best is minimal for it appears difficult to generalize principals' needs in this area given the uniqueness of each individual. As Aitken (1992) said, findings from surveys conducted by NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals) and AASA (American Association of Secondary Administrators) suggested that principals take greater responsibility for their own learning to better meet the divergent needs of their respective situations. Principals need to develop their own meaning from professional development experiences, constructing their own reality to suit their individual needs (Robertson, 1997; Aitken, 1992).



What do principals say about how they learn best? In a study conducted by Neufeld (1997) 42 principals from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina were interviewed regarding what structures maximized their learning. The principals in this study indicated that they valued the following:

1. *Identification of needs and involvement in planning*

The middle level principals in this study shared their need to be involved in the planning of any professional development initiative in which they were engaged. They recognized their responsibility for taking charge of their own professional growth, stating that true learning was “not something others do to or for them” (p. 39).

2. *Reflection within the school context and sharing with colleagues*

Principals in this study regarded a cohort experience as primary to their learning. They indicated that it was important for them to be able to share ideas and strategies with colleagues and have the opportunity to address common areas of concern.

3. *Systematic development supported by district time, money, and resources*

Principals indicated that in-service experiences seemed to “fade surprisingly quickly with little or no real benefit” (p. 39). They preferred that the learning be an ongoing process and part of an established routine. They valued learning opportunities that allowed them to try out new skills in their schools and report their findings to a supportive group.

4. *Competent instructors using practical adult learning processes*

Principals in this study wanted to learn in an environment that honored their individual settings and content knowledge. They wanted to be challenged to reflect upon their practice, have opportunities to try new skills, and evaluate their progress with input from others.

A qualitative case study of six elementary school principals shared similar results as reported in a recent *Educational Leadership* article (May 2001).

Principals who had been in their positions for three or more years indicated the need to network with other school leaders with whom they had developed a trusting relationship and with whom they could share their concerns. They emphasized the need to meet with principals from school districts other than their own in order to be removed from the immediate demands of their setting. They also valued the more objective feedback that might result from such meetings. Principals in the case study described the need to reflect upon their day-to-day experiences. One principal shared, "I want eyes and ears that can help me ask the important questions." This group also mentioned the need for district support that promoted ongoing connections with other principals, not "one-shot sessions" (p. 76). The desire to work with colleagues in a collaborative setting matched the needs of participants in Goddard's research (1997) that examined a cohort partnership between universities and school leaders.

## Needs of Adult Learners

An examination of principals' learning needs would be incomplete without reviewing the research regarding meeting the learning needs of adults learners, for research indicated (Hart, 1996; Cross, 1981) that changes in professional development for principals needs to be grounded in cognitive theories of adult learning. As Knowles (1978) said, andragogy is the science of helping adults learn which is based on four assumptions. He continued by saying that as a person matures, he or she:

1. is a self-directed learner;
2. reflects an accumulation of experiences that act as resources for learning;
3. is oriented to learning based on social roles, and
4. is interested in learning about subjects that has direct implication to an identified problem.

Lazurus (1991) and Robles (1998) concurred when they indicate that adult learner's life experiences contribute significantly to new learning. According to Darling-Hammond (1992) and Cross (1988), adults bring their own schema to the learning experience which have been shaped by their values, beliefs, experiences, and perceptions. Hiemstra & Sisco (1990) supported the need to individualize the instruction of adult learners as the unique experiences, differences, and learning needs are considered. Adults value being honored for the diversity that they bring to the learning setting (McCafferty, 1990), for learning for the adult is connected to his/her ego. This individual approach to professional development honors the many, varied ways to develop ideas and experiences of the adult learner as he/she explores the emerging self (Lambert, 1987), for as Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler (2000) remarked, "How we know is who we are" (p. 341).

Research regarding adult learners suggests that adults will retain what they feel to be relevant and applicable to their daily lives particularly when given the opportunity to apply the knowledge in a meaningful way (McGregor, Halvorsen, Fisher-Douglas, et al., 1998; Restine, 1997; Knowles, 1978; Cross, 1998; Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). As Wlodkowski (1999) indicated, meaning sustains involvement for learning must have personal relevancy for the participant. (2001) and Verduin & Greer, (1977) said that not only do adults value learning that has relevance, but they also need the capacity to interpret the perceived needs of their own settings in their own way, for learning is most useful when it is unique, timely and voluntary. Restine (1997) stated that adults embrace learning goals that are realistic and have value to them in their lives. Knowles (1978), (2001), and Cross, (1988) supported the necessity of realistic goals indicating that adults benefit from learning that is in direct response to their identified needs. Robles (1998) cautioned that it is important that in an adult learning situation, time is taken to assess the specific needs of the adult learner, for adults frequently want to move to a solution rather than adequately addressing the problem. Cross (1998) added that adult learners want to set their pace of learning and want to be in a setting that matches their learning style.

Adults learn through interaction with and support from others (Wlodkowski, 1999). He added that adults are motivated to learn when the learning is:

- Inclusionary: Adult learners benefit from being part of a community of learners.
- Respectful: Adult learners benefit from learning in an environment where they can be themselves without fear or threat of humiliation.

- Connected: Adult learners benefit from learning in an environment where mutual caring and support exists.

As Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, et al. (1995) indicated, “Adults learn through the processes of meaning and knowledge construction, participation and reflections” (p. 29). Giving adults the opportunity to reflect with others in a trusting environment enhances adult learning (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). As Knowles (1978) stated, shared vision, understanding, and respectful relationships are all crucial elements of a culture that fosters adult learning. Galbraith (1991) wrote that adult learners benefit from having the opportunity to work with others, moving away from the traditional lecture delivery of information to a setting where collaboration is emphasized and independent work is deemphasized. Learning begins with the development of relationships with others as knowledge is gained through working with groups of people with whom a level of trust has been built (McCafferty, 1990; Robles, 1998; Gordon, 2002). According to Knowles (1978), Cross (1988), and Restine (1997), adults who work in groups are more likely to improve their learning, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, for adult learners do best in positive climate that supports their learning

Having the research focus on the learning needs of women principals provided the opportunity to review the literature about how women learn. Although there was an abundance of literature about how women lead, resources regarding how women learn is less prolific. Feminist literature suggested that the characteristics of women leaders included the tendency to be able to relate with others in a collaborative environment and to share information in order to facilitate group decision making (Brown, 1995). These characteristics are aligned to the tenets of adult learning theory that emphasizes

collaboration and support (Cross, 1989; Galbraith, 1991; Heimstra & Sisco; McCafferty, 1990; Wlodkowski, 1999).

The connection between women's leadership style and their learning is implied rather than stated. The literature about women's leadership frequently references the need for skills usually associated with female leadership; that is, team building, interconnectedness, group problem solving, and shared decision making Goldberger et al., (1996); Gupton & Slick, 1996; Lambert, 1998). As Papalewis & Yerkes (1995) wrote, females lead by encouraging cooperation and maintaining open communication in a collaborative setting. They continued by saying that women give support as much as they seek support indicating that women help others grow and develop through their traditional nurturing role. The literature indicated that women as leaders are more likely to stress interpersonal skills, listen to alternative views, and encourage effort (Goldberger et al., 1996). However, it is important to add that Tyree (1995) and Ferguson (1994) stated that the qualities that are associated with female leadership may be related less to gender than to a perceived position of subordination.

Goldberger (1996) referred more specifically to women's learning when she indicated that a benefit of working with other women was the ideas that germinated from shared conversation. She added that knowledge is tentative depending on the shared perspectives of other learners. She added, "We marveled about how ideas grew as we talked and listened to one another" (p. xi).

## Summary

As the evolution of school principals is examined, it is clear that the expectations of the principal have expanded significantly over time. Historically, principals have been inundated with suggestions about what they needed to learn and how they needed to learn it as prescribed by groups or individuals that viewed the principals' role from a distance. In recent years, principals have been encouraged to learn beyond theory and pedagogy; rather, they have been encouraged to embrace learning opportunities that reflect a rhetoric of reform (Robertson, 1997) that encompasses anything from character education to student achievement. Both the literature about the needs of adult learners and principals' learning needs support the necessity of addressing identified learning needs in a trusting environment that fosters collaboration and reflection (Cross, 1988; Wlodkowski, 1999; Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Neufeld, 1997; , 2001). Although there is little research on women as learners, the generalized characteristics of women leaders reflect a style that tends to be relational and collaborative in nature.

As the learning needs of principals are examined in light of the expectations and responsibilities of their work, the question remains about how individual principals view this tension between the demands of the job and their own learning. Although there are similarities in the research regarding the learning needs of principals, it has been emphasized that the learning must be aligned with the specific needs of each principal in their respective settings. Given the complexity of the position, it is important to discover how the identified learning needs of principals are being addressed within our schools and how principals are attending to their unique learning needs.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

## Overview

A review of the literature supports the need for a study that examines the learning needs of Maine school principals through their own eyes, for there has been relatively little research conducted in this area. As the demands of school principals continue to escalate, a topic that bears scrutiny is an exploration of how principals balance the roles and responsibilities of their position while they pursue their learning needs as school leaders. The goal of this research was to discover how principals understood their own learning. In order to address this research goal, this study focused on four research questions:

1. What do principals feel they need to learn?

The purpose of this question was to discover what specific topics and/or procedures, if any, do principals feel that they need to learn. The question explored what topics of learning were driven by the system and/or the school in which the principal worked. The question also explored what identified learning needs enhanced the work in the principals' settings. ....

2. What do principals say about how they learn?

The purpose of this question was to discover what principals say about how they learn best. The question explored principals' understanding of what conditions need to exist to maximize their learning, which include traditional coursework in a classroom setting, informal conversations with colleagues, professional readings, or any other methods that facilitate principals' learning.



3. How do principals define meaningful learning experiences?

The purpose of this question was to collect data that could be compared to the responses given to the first two questions. The responses from each question were examined, exploring the connection, if any, between identified learning needs, learning settings, and what had been identified as meaningful learning.

4. What impact has principal's learning had upon their practice?

The purpose of this question was to explore how principals' learning influenced their schools. Principals were asked to identify the artifacts, if any, in their building that could be used as tangible evidence of their learning.

This study explored how five women principals in Maine understand their learning needs and what impact the challenges of the position had upon those needs.

As the study progressed, the examination of the data sought to;

- describe the learning needs of principals both in content and delivery;
- explore the influence of specific types of learning experiences;
- identify insights and understandings of how the principal's position influenced the choice of learning topics and/or opportunities;
- analyze the data to identify recurrent themes that either supported or challenged participant's articulated learning preferences;
- probed principal's responses to develop an understanding of how each principal viewed the perceptions gathered by the researcher;
- match recurring themes to applicable theories of learning, drawing conclusions that either supported or challenged said theories.

## Data Collection

A qualitative research design most effectively met the needs of this inquiry, for as Maxwell stated, it “recognizes the importance of interconnection and interaction” (p.3) between the participant and his/her lived reality. “ He added that qualitative research encourages an exploration into the meaning of interviewee responses beyond the literal account and to consider the context of each individual setting. This research design will encourage the pursuit of “unanticipated phenomena and influences” which can inform conclusions. Examination of both process and data focused on how interviewee responses were related to both the articulated and unarticulated themes (Maxwell, 1996).

This pilot study was part of the *Doctoral Practicum in Educational Research* that was a seminar designed to prepare doctoral students for later research. The study was conducted in a natural setting through the lens of the phenomenological ethnographer. The premise of this research was to make sense out of people’s lives and their responses to it, keeping in mind that all responses are meaningful (Biklen, 1992) for there are multiple ways of interpreting experiences. The methods of interviewing, observing, and analyzing were used to develop a holistic view of the principal’s learning experiences.

The data collection structures were developed from a pilot study that was conducted with three principals who were chosen for their proximity to the researcher and their agreement to participate in the study. The purpose of the pilot study was to provide the opportunity to practice the skills of research design, data collection and data analysis. It provided a vehicle through which to examine the learning needs of Maine school principals based on an initial interview and a follow-up conversation with three practitioners. These Maine principals included representation from the elementary and

secondary levels. The interview questions used in the initial interview were selected to help the interviewer develop a sense of the practitioner's setting, surface how each participant viewed his/her own learning and explore principals' recent learning experiences.

All interviews were audio-taped for data collection and analysis purposes. The analysis of the collected data revealed few commonalities regarding practitioners' learning needs which reinforced the concept of supporting the learning needs of principals by focusing on each principal's identified priorities and concerns. After the data analysis for each interview had been completed, follow-up questions were designed for each individual that served to either confirm or challenge the interviewer's perceptions of the initial interview. This experience provided the catalyst for the research proposal, for it made it possible for me to refine methodology and design in a safe and supportive environment. The pilot study provided an opportunity to practice interview protocols, collect and organize data, analyze data and compare its relevancy to the research question. Each stage of this pilot study was shared with other students enrolled in the doctoral seminar for feedback and suggestions. As a result of this feedback, both the interview questions and the questions regarding the collected data became more focused.

In addition, this study built on the work of Dr. George Marnik and Dr. Linda Hollomon each of whom studied, in part, the professional development of school leaders in their respective settings. Dr. Marnik conducted a qualitative research study that examined the misalignment between the professional development opportunities available to school leaders and the expectations of their roles. Dr. Hollomon conducted a

qualitative research study that described the characteristics of Principals' Centers as a context for principals' professional development. Both of these studies helped lay the groundwork for this research, as the connections between principals' expressed learning needs and the influence of their learning on their school settings were examined.

### Selection of Participants

The selection of the candidates for this study regarding principals' perceived learning needs focused on five Maine principals that shared similar demographic features. The criteria that was used to select research candidates included gender, school level (elementary, middle school, or high school), school size and population, and time spent in the position. In addition, each participant's school was located within a geographical location to which I had reasonable access. The use of a qualitative research model facilitated an exploration regarding how principals understood their learning needs and how their understanding influenced their behavior.

The dissertation study mirrored the steps taken in the pilot study. The criteria used for participant selection were chosen to maximize the similarities among participants so that any conclusions drawn from this work was derived from comparable sources and were, thus, more reliable. Five participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. They were of the same gender, in this case, female. The focus on women principals facilitated an exploration into women's learning needs which is an area that has received little attention in the literature.
2. Each participant was the principal of a school serving the same level of student population; in this case, the principal of a middle school. Middle schools typically serve as a bridge between the elementary school and the high

school, reflecting at some level the characteristics of both programs. It is at this level that I have had the most recent experience having served as a principal of a middle school that provided this bridge.

3. Participants were principals of schools that served similar populations and were similar in size. Principals of schools serving a suburban population of not less than 300 but not more than 700 were identified as possible participants in the study.
4. Each participant had been a principal from five to 15 years and served from three to ten years in her current position. Principals with this level of experience may be more ready to examine their own learning needs having moved beyond the initial stages of the position. The participants who matched this criterion had developed a strong sense of both the role of the principal and the needs of the school during their first few years in the position.
5. Participants were in a geographic area in which it was feasible for me to travel. Principals serving in schools within an hour's drive from my home base and meeting the other criteria were considered as possible participants in the study.

### The Interviews

According to Maykut & Morehouse (1994), in the phenomenological approach of qualitative research in the naturalistic mode, the researcher must examine the words and actions of the research subjects to help develop a sense of how they interpret their world. These authors added that interviews are one of the primary methods of data collection in qualitative research because they focus on gaining participant perspective using the

language and meaning constructed by the individual. The goals of the data collection were to gather information about the participants' setting, surface how each participant perceives her own learning needs, and explore the participants' recent learning experiences.

Each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions beginning in the spring of 2002 and extending into the winter of the same year. The purpose of these interviews was to provide insights into each participant's learning needs and benefits derived from that learning. Each participant's responses to the interview protocol questions provided data from which I developed subsequent questions that were pertinent to individual participants. Each initial interview took place within a time span of 45 minutes to an hour and a half.

#### Interview #1

In addition to sharing an overview of the research thesis, a goal of the initial interview of each of the five selected principals was to collect biographical and school context information to help develop a foundation of information and to build a collegial relationship. Prior to the first visit, principals were given a questionnaire (see Appendix A) for the purpose of collecting information about the principal's background and her current position. In addition, questions were asked regarding school demographics including but not limited to questions regarding school size, economic status of the population served, age and education of the teaching staff and age and condition of the building.

During the first visit, each principal was asked to identify the challenges of being a building principal and, more specifically, what she viewed as the challenges of being principal in this specific position. The questions in this interview (see Appendix B) were asked for the purpose of identifying the history of system initiatives and building initiatives that had helped shaped the principal's role and absorbed her time and energy.

An analysis of the data collected from the first series of questions helped facilitate an understanding of the principal's school and personal context which helped to develop a sense of how the principal's surroundings influence her decisions about her learning. How did the age and condition of the building influence how she spends her time? How did the needs of the staff influence her position? Was the principal faced with the needs of a veteran staff, a new staff, or a combination of both? The results of the analysis of this data helped develop questions that were asked in subsequent interviews and inform the findings as appropriate.

### Interview #2

The purpose of the second interview was to explore the identified learning needs of the principal and how they related to the principal's actual learning experiences. Initially, questions were asked to help develop a sense of what the research participants viewed as 'learning experiences' followed by an inquiry that helped identify what learning experiences the principal found the most meaningful. The next series of questions in this interview (see Appendix C) explored what the principal had highlighted as perceived learning needs, what she had identified as meaningful learning experiences, and what connection, if any, those needs had to the building and system initiatives.

An analysis of the data explored the connection between what the principal identified as her needs and in what learning opportunities she had engaged. The analysis helped determine how the principal best learned and how strongly the chosen learning opportunities matched her needs. In addition, to what extent were the principal's choices of learning opportunities influenced by the needs of the building and by system initiatives in contrast to her own, more personal leadership needs?

### Interview #3

The third interview was for the purpose of exploring the impact of the principal's learning experiences. The questions in this third interview (see Appendix D) were designed to probe how the principal had made the transition from learning to implementation. Questions were asked that helped discover a connection between what the principal had identified as personal and professional needs and how the pursuit of those needs was evident in the building. In addition, questions were asked that addressed why some learning experiences never reach the implementation stage.

The analysis of this data attempted to link what the principal had identified as meaningful learning with both the expressed learning needs of each principal and what the principal had chosen for learning opportunities during a two year period preceding the interviews.

### Analysis and Presentation of the Data

The final phase of the study consisted of an analysis of the collected data. At the end of each interview, tapes were transcribed by a third-party. Personal thoughts and impressions were added to the side margins of the typed transcripts (Maxwell, 1996). Patterns were developed based on the data that was collected during each interview by



charting the responses under previously developed research questions. Emerging themes were created based on similarities and differences among the five principals' responses. The resultant patterns were coded by matching the participants' responses to the four research questions as follows:

- What do principals feel they need to learn?
- What do principals say about how they learn?
- How do principals identify meaningful learning experiences?
- What impact have principals' learning experiences had upon their practice?

This process resulted in an examination of the connection between what the principal had identified as her learning needs, about what topics she had chosen to learn, and how her learning had influenced her work. An audit trail was created from the collection of the data that was reviewed for accuracy by research participants when necessary. Finally, themes were developed that described how participants viewed themselves as learners using the commonalities of the responses as a lens through which to view the work.

An examination of the data focused on the commonalities of responses and how they might transfer to an understanding of the needs of all Maine principals. The results of the analysis will be shared with those institutions that provide learning opportunities to Maine principals in hopes that it may inform their work. These institutions include the Maine Principals' Academy, and the Maine Principals' Association. The results should help to influence how the learning needs of Maine school principals are addressed so that each school leader is affirmed and supported in a manner that is most beneficial to that leader. Most importantly, it is imperative that this research be shared with practicing school leaders/principals for the purpose of enhancing their awareness regarding the

pursuit of their own learning needs through an examination of the research conclusions and through the appreciation of the individual stories of each research participant.

### Validity and Trustworthiness

As indicated below, the internal and external validity of the research was achieved in several ways.

- **Preparation:** Initially, participation in the *Doctoral Practicum in Educational Research* provided support with interview protocols and coding processes in the Pilot Study that informed this research.
- **Participant Safeguards:** Each participant in the study signed a consent form (see Appendix E giving participants the option of withdrawing from the project at any time and to protect their anonymity).
- **Member checks:** At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they had anything that they would like to add to the interview that had not surfaced as a result of the interview questions. As each interview was examined, a summary of the participant's responses was developed that served as an introduction to the next interview. Any questions that surfaced regarding participant's responses were asked at that time. The purpose of introducing the next interview with the summary and the questions was to check for understanding regarding what the participants had shared. As the study progressed, e-mail correspondence was used to clarify a point or enhance the understanding of specific passages in the transcribed data.
- **Data Analysis:** Once the data had been transcribed, notes were generated both on the margins of the transcripts and in a separate journal that reflected

personal thoughts and impressions. The information was coded and sorted into themes and patterns that emerged from the examination of the data.

- Audit trail: A notebook was used to store consent forms, interview schedules, tape transcriptions, and notes regarding reactions to the interviews.

Using these processes, validity and trustworthiness were consistently maintained throughout this study.

## CHAPTER 4: PRINCIPALS TALK ABOUT THEIR LEARNING

### Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to report on the results of the interviews that were conducted with five Maine women principals. The information shared in this chapter will focus on the research questions stated below:

1. What do principals feel they need to learn?
2. What do principals say about how they learn?

In addition, this chapter will present an overview of “lived realities” (Allison, 1996) of the principals including data regarding the principals and their schools, the communities in which the schools are located, and their recent learning experiences.

### An Introduction to the Principals

For the purpose of this research, five women principals were selected from a pool of 13 potential principals. The principals that were selected for this research were serving as principals in middle schools where the school population ranged between 465 and 700 students, consisting of a mix of students from a cross section of socioeconomic levels as indicated by the principals of each building. In addition, each of the research principals was located in a school that was geographically accessible to me. The following table represents a summary of data that was collected through a questionnaire that each participant was asked to complete as part of the study. Throughout the study, pseudonyms have been used to identify individuals and locations in order to respect their anonymity and ensure confidentiality.

Table 4.1

## Participant Data

Principal	Highest Degree Held	# Students	# Staff	Yrs. in Position	Bldg. Cond.
Claire	MS (Ed. Admin.)	465	5	12	Poor
Betsy	MS (Ed. Admin.)	700	8	6	Fair
Marsha	MS (Couns. Ed.)	667	6	3	Poor
Annie	MS (Literacy)	599	60	15	Good
Sophie	MS (Couns. Ed.)	700	80	4	Poor

It is interesting to note that two of the principals in this study obtained their Master's Degree in Educational Administration, two principals had Master's Degrees in Counselor Education, and one held a Master's Degree in Literacy. Whether or not the focus of these degree programs had any influence on the kinds of learning opportunities that they pursued would be speculation since there was no question in the interviews that addressed this issue. However, the number of years in the position did influence the principal's learning as it became clear in the interviews that veteran administrator who accepted new positions were immersed in learning about the schools and staff of that school. The condition of the building influenced principals' learning as well, for the three principals that indicated that their buildings were in poor condition were expected to take an active role in the building projects that were taking place in their districts. The principals that participated in building projects learned about the connection between vision and building design as they devoted much of their time to this initiative. A secondary influence of the fair to poor conditions of the school was connected to safety

for discipline issues resulted from having a space that was too small for the needs of the students.

The uniqueness of each of the principal's experiences could be attributed to variables including but not limited to the principals' relationship with the superintendent and the political history of the school. Another important variable for principals is what each of them felt to be the priority of their work. In order to have a better understanding of the study, a brief description of each principal and her school is included in this section. The data that contributed to these descriptions was collected through interviews conducted in each of the principal's schools, representing each participant's most widely held views.

#### The Principals: A Closer Look

Claire, age 53, is the principal in a university town who describes her school as having a balance of blue collar and white collar community members, although the percentage of students receiving free lunch (5%) would suggest a more white collar community. She has held this position for 12 years, having chosen to remain in an "old, tired, cramped building that has gone beyond its usefulness" rather than apply for other positions. The reason that she gave for staying was for the purpose of supporting staff and students through a "public and widespread" media event that had had a negative and demoralizing impact on the school's staff. The history of the school included a "swinging door" of administration that changed the way Claire looked at leadership. She referred to her staff as "grieving on a number of fronts," feeling that no one cared about them in the district. Claire made it clear that the majority of the work that she has done in the school was a result of the aforementioned "media event" and the tension that existed between

and among staff and administration. She made it her goal to create a “foundation” of trusting working relationships with staff that she felt was critical to establish before they could move forward as a unit. She viewed dealing with difficult staff issues as an opportunity to develop her leadership skills, and took the bull by the horns by inviting outside consultants to work with her and give her feedback about her leadership. She talked about “working with the staff, bringing them together, getting past the hurdles and moving forward.” She indicated that, “These are my people. We went through hell and back together, so we’re bonded.”

Betsy, age 55, has served as the middle school principal in this community for six years. However, she assumed the principalship in this school after having held the position of assistant principal for 10 years previously. The community in which Betsy’s school is located serves students from a wide variety of socioeconomic levels, as the community is both a college town and a mill town. In Betsy’s school, 47% of the students receive free lunch. In addition, as many as 100 students transition in and out of the school from September to June. Most recently, the school has experienced an influx of ESL (English as a Second Language) students which has impacted the allocation of resources in the school budget. As Betsy talked about the needs of her school, she identified the need to provide a safe and respectful environment, emphasizing the safety concerns of what, in Maine, is considered an inner city school. Betsy and the system’s SRO (School Resource Officer) have implemented a Bullying Prevention Program in the school to help address the issue of personal safety. Secondly, she talked about the work that she has done to meet the school district’s directive of removing her school from the list of schools in Maine who according to the state testing, are not making AYP (Adequate

Yearly Progress). Connected to that goal is immersing the staff in an assessment system that identifies target assessment goals for each student, which was a challenge with a 21% special education population and a 2% ESL population. She talked about the challenge of addressing the academic skills of her students who come from six different elementary schools in the district and who reflect varying levels of academic performance.

Marsha, age 55, is principal of both the junior high school and another school, having recently been assigned a smaller school that currently holds the fifth and sixth graders that will be part of her middle school when the current building project is complete. She is a relative new-comer to the community, as at the time of this research she was completing her third year in the district after having served as a middle school assistant principal and a high school principal before accepting her current position. The community in which her school is housed serves as a bedroom community for a nearby city and reflects the highest socioeconomic level of the five districts represented in this study, with a virtually non-existent free lunch population. Currently, Marsha's energies have been devoted to the building project that also meant making a transition from the current junior high school model to a middle school model. As she sees it, her primary role is to bring the staffs of her two schools together as they embrace a middle school philosophy that is different from both the elementary school and high school mindsets. "We're a middle school and we get middle school-age kids. That's the part that I can't forget and I don't want the staff to forget." Unlike the other principals in the study, Marsha was the only one who mentioned the tension between balancing the needs of her family with the needs of the principals' role. As Marsha immerses herself in the



responsibilities of her position, she expressed a need to balance these responsibilities with the responsibilities she has as a wife, mother, and grandmother. She budgets her time consciously, trying to leave the office at the same time each day in order to be home with her family unless an evening meeting intervenes. Even then, she tries to dash home to connect with family, for she indicates that this is her way to “recharge her batteries” before returning to school. She is interested in pursuing a position as a superintendent, but is concerned about the amount of time that the position requires, which would represent even more time away from family.

Annie, age 54, taught in the same building in which she has served for 15 years as principal. Her school, which serves students in grades five through eight, is located in what Annie describes as an “upper middle class” community where only 4% of the students are eligible for free lunch. She describes herself as “running on the edge of my competence” in terms of staying current with the initiatives that come her way, one of which is the seventh grade laptop initiative. Throughout the interview process, Annie spoke of the needs of the students in her school as her primary focus. She felt that it was her responsibility to help the community to understand the needs of the “emerging adolescent,” for although the school has been called a ‘middle school’ since 1971, Annie’s philosophy of what it means to be a middle school has not always been shared by the superintendent and the school board. When speaking about her own learning, Annie invariably connected it to students. She told stories of students that she has known as she describes her own learning and the application of that learning. She indicated that, “Sometimes a little piece that I have (learned) helps me connect it to a bigger piece that can be used for the greater good.” She likened her learning to Lego pieces, as she was

always looking for a “good fit” between what she had learned and what students need.

Annie teaches part-time in the University of Maine system.

Sophie, age 53, has served as principal of her building for four years. Sophie’s school is located in a southern Maine mill town and serves a cross-section of socioeconomic levels, housing students in grades six through eight. Sophie began her school career as a guidance counselor that helped frame her work as she paid close attention to the personal needs of the staff and students in the building. She began her administrative career in the same building in which she had served as assistant principal, left the district for a few years, returning as principal when the opportunity presented itself. During the time that she served as the assistant principal, the school was recognized nationally as a Blue Ribbon School. She recalls those days fondly, talking about the “energy and excitement” of being part of a movement where teachers and administration worked together toward the common goal of establishing themselves as a middle school. When she returned, she found that the staff had gone through what she refers to as “difficult times,” which included a lack of stability in administration, low teacher morale, and problems with student discipline. She spent the first year meeting with staff, parents, and students either individually or in small groups giving them the opportunity to share their concerns. “I did a lot of listening,” she indicated. Currently, her biggest challenges are addressing issues around violence, family instability and student learning. She spends much of her time in the hallways, in the cafeteria and in the classrooms talking to staff and students. She describes herself as a “hands-on person,” indicating that “the only way of finding out (about what’s going on) is by going into the classrooms, by talking with students, and spending time with staff.” Sophie’s choice of

learning opportunities was influenced by what she referred to as the lack of a “safe” learning environment in her administrative team, for professional development continues to be a high priority for her. To enhance her learning, Sophie has been involved with the Annenberg Institute where she has focused on improving her leadership skills by being part of a team of other school leaders who identify and explore common leadership concerns.

In summary, each of the five participants in the research study talked most about what was most important to her. Claire, Marsha, and Sophie was each immersed in building projects. For Claire, the movement to a new building was aligned to her work with the staff to create a more cohesive faculty. Sophie, Claire and Annie identified the importance of developing meaningful, effective relationships with staff to enhance the culture and climate of their respective buildings. Betsy and Sophie, each of whom work in city schools, identified the safety needs of students and staff as a priority. Betsy, alone, identified her work with student assessment as a priority, while Marsha was the only principal who mentioned the tension between maintaining a balance between the principalship and family.

#### Principals’ Recent Learning Experiences

Although the principals identified their work with staff as a learning priority, they were able to identify specific learning events that took place beyond the school walls. During the initial phase of the research, each principal was asked to record the learning experiences in which she had participated during the past school year as part of a questionnaire (see Appendix I) that preceded the interviews. The following table (4.2)

lists the workshops and/or conferences that principals had attended in the school year preceding the interview portion of this research.

Table 4.2

## Recently Attended Learning Events

Principal	Learning Events Attended 2001-2002
Claire	School Law Institute Assessment Conference Middle Level Conference on Technology
Betsy	Conference on the Homeless Global Connections Conference Data Base Decision Making (Assessment) Best Practices for Teaching and Learning Literacy Leaders Institute Bullying Awareness Institute Site Visit to Middle School, Lincolnshire, IL
Marsha	Maine Principals' Fall Conference Casco Bay Educational Alliance Technology Workshops Middle Level Conference Student Leader Conference on Bullying Math Instruction Workshop Assessment Workshop (Marzano) Curriculum and Instruction (Wellman)
Annie	Gates Training for Technology Introduction to Mac OS Middle Level Conference School Law Institute PAAP Workshop NELMS Conference
Sophie	Principals' Retreat (Annenberg Institute)

The purpose of gathering information about principals' recent learning experiences was to have a basis of comparison as they talked about their specific learning needs during the first interview. In some cases, an alignment existed between principals' self-identified learning needs while in other cases there was little match between the two. In the final chapter of this research, the alignment between what principals' selected for learning opportunities and what they identified as their learning needs will be examined and analyzed.

Following the collection of this data, each of the five principals engaged in the study were interviewed based on established interview protocols (See Appendix II, III, and IV) on three separate occasions beginning in the spring of 2002 and ending in December of the same year. The purpose of the initial interview was to develop a sense of the participant's school setting and to explore the successes and challenges of each principal. Principals talked about how the perceived role of the principal influenced their work day, their personal learning needs, and how they interacted with staff as they learned with them and from them. The second interview focused on the specific learning needs of principals, while the third interview explored evidences of principals' learning.

In summary, principals identified the need to learn about the following topics and are listed in order of priority based on the frequency of responses:

1. Technology
2. Assessment
3. Building projects
4. Safety
5. Relationships

It is important to mention that the topic of relationships was threaded throughout the interviews rather than being identified as an isolated topic. Although only one of the five principals mentioned this area as a specific learning need, all of the principals mentioned the importance of, as Betsy indicated, "... working on the relationship part."

### Principals Share Their Learning Needs

When principals were asked what they needed to learn, they identified topics that took priority in their work. Two areas that all principals held in common regarding their learning needs were technology and assessment. Each principal talked about the necessity of learning more about technology given the advent of the seventh grade laptop initiative spearheaded by Maine Governor Angus King. In addition, each principal talked about their learning needs regarding assessment which continues to be a focus for all Maine schools as the importance of standards-based test results gathers steam. Additional topics which principals identified as learning needs included gaining more information about school construction, as three out of the five principals were immersed in building projects. Two of the principals cited safety issues as a concern for their respective buildings as well.

During the initial interview, principals were asked to brainstorm their learning needs and explain how they determined that need. The following section contains principals' responses to this question centered upon specific topics about which they felt they needed more information.

## Technology

All of the principals interviewed spoke about the need to learn more about technology, as each of their buildings have been immersed in the seventh grade laptop initiative spearheaded by Maine's Governor Angus King. Giving each seventh grader a laptop computer forced the hand of both administrators and teachers as they looked for ways to effectively interface the technology with both existing curricula and building structures as they struggled with this state mandate. Claire suggested that her learning had as much to do about the logistics of how to implement the laptop initiative as it did about how to effectively use the technology as she and her staff struggled to identify the pieces that matched their needs. She indicated that:

I'm staggering under this burden, the staff is staggering under this burden, but then at a certain point I said, "Wait a minute... we're right there, on the next wave of [technology] with this laptop initiative. There's so much coming together so fast that it's overwhelming if you let it be, but if you just kind of sit back and let it happen and pick and choose the parts of it that apply to your circumstances... it doesn't have to be overwhelming at all."

A secondary consideration arose from the laptop initiative since both Betsy and Sophie talked about needing to discover how and where to obtain resources to support the laptop initiative. As Betsy pointed out, discovering ways to manage the logistics of the laptop initiative was a learning experience in itself, for the mandate was not accompanied by monies for storage cabinets or rewiring, as was the case in her school. "Those cabinets were almost \$600.00 [each] and I needed 37 of them!" The laptop initiative was not the only technological learning in which Betsy was immersed. She talked about learning how



to operate a digital camera that she used “to take pictures of the graffiti on the bathroom walls,” adding that she didn’t have time to learn “how to manipulate the picture... I don’t have time to sit there [and learn about it].”

Regarding time, resources, and technology, Sophie spoke to the events that preceded the distribution of laptops. She indicated that:

This year more than ever technology is driving my learning because of the seventh grade laptop initiative. It’s actually been about a year now...and we’re just getting ready to give out the laptops to the seventh graders so you know next week we’ll be celebrating that success, but behind that is close to a year’s worth of training and immersion, not only myself but a number of people on the staff and the different steps that we’ve gone through to get everything set up for the laptops. I don’t feel like I have to be an expert on everything, but I do feel I have to know where the resources are... it’s very important that I have a pretty wide scope in terms of middle school education and what the best opportunities are for students this age and for the teachers working with them. I’m always looking and trying to get a handle on the latest information [regarding technology and student use] that comes out.

Annie talked about her own learning about technology and how it influenced her school. She pointed out that “if left to my own devices, I would learn about technology for word processing and e-mail, doing things that are personally satisfying for me.” However, she talked about how the laptop initiative launched her into a conversation with a colleague who was skilled in video conferencing and they talked about the possibility of having the superintendent and school board work with students who were involved in the

high school's building project. She talked about how the addition of technology enhanced the work with students and staff as she added:

That [technology] is totally beyond me. I master technology that is going to help me do my work, that I can mesh into my own reality. These guys are seventh graders so when they get to the high school they will have a vested interest. They will be interviewing some people that they don't know at all and work with more than one teacher. They will be showing the school board through their charts and ...Power Point presentation, how the project is connected to what they do in their lives.

### Assessment

Assessment was another area which four out of the five principals identified as something about which they needed to learn. The bottom line, Betsy indicated, is that "we're all faced with the MEA's (Maine Educational Assessment), making sure we're thinking about student progress." As Betsy spoke about the work that her system had done regarding "learning targets," she indicated that part of the learning involved figuring out the logistics of the system. She and her staff worked together to develop a system where students could access their scores on identified academic goals at any time. The learning about effective assessment systems continues to evolve in her district as administration and staff focus their energy on students' academic performance.

Her staff's challenge, she indicated, was not getting so "caught up" in underestimating the abilities of middle school age students that they lost the focus on academics. A second challenge was exploring with teachers how to raise the scores of the

ESL (English as a Second Language) students. She talked about the struggles that her school was having in meeting the needs of the burgeoning ESL population as she added:

We're having the ESL kids take the targets and we know that there will be some difficulty, but we want to be able to learn from that information...But we're still trying, we're struggling, what do you do with the kids that are in ESL who are in a regular science and history [class] because we don't have enough staff to give them a separate [language] class. That's another area that I need to get more knowledge in.

Marsha indicated that her most significant learning during her two-plus years in her current position has focused on "curriculum instruction and assessment" as she had worked to find her place in a new school setting. She indicated that:

I think in terms of what I learn on a day-to-day basis has been, I would say that's more on the sort of inner workings of a middle school, the students' needs, staff needs, and how this all comes together. It has given me a clearer picture of what goes on, but it all comes back to curriculum instruction and assessment.

Annie has been interested in assessment since becoming an educator as she exclaimed "standardized testing was not my friend." She spoke about learning about assessment from a student who had developed his own system of filling in the 'bubbles' on a standardized testing answer key which had little to do with identifying the appropriate answer. That experience led her to examine alternative means of assessing student progress, for she saw the school's goal as developing a system that accurately reflected students' academic progress. She indicated that:

It's all about teachers, changing the way they think about things, so they will need coaching and support as they go through that. So I would say that the biggest thing, whether you're talking about No Child Left Behind, the Maine Learning Results, standards-based education, or exit exams, I want to be sure we use assessment to inform the learning.

Like Annie, Sophie identified assessment as a focus for her school as well, talking about her role on the district assessment committee as it works to “develop a local assessment for all of the students.” However, it's interesting to note that although Sophie mentioned her role on the district assessment committee, the issue of assessment did not receive much emphasis as she talked about her learning needs.

### Building Projects

Learning, it seems, comes from the need to know. It was virtually impossible for principals to talk about their own learning needs without the perceived needs of staff and the limitations imposed by inadequate facilities. Claire, Marsha, and Sophie were involved in building projects. Claire connected the condition of her present facility to the effectiveness of the staff when she indicated:

[When I think about my school] one of the things that comes to mind is the facility itself and just how time consuming, tough, and difficult it is to work in such an old, tired, cramped building that's gone beyond its usefulness, and to do a good job... with kids . There are examples all over the building of how I wish things were different in the building; hence, my devotion to the building project because I can see what the school could look like and be like for staff and kids.

Claire talked about learning from other principals who had been involved in recent building projects, taking “16 pages of notes” about integrating sixth, seventh and eighth graders from different sending schools into a larger facility. She emphasized that being immersed in the building project represented more than learning about the construction of a new school; it also involved learning about the needs of the community, staff, and students who would inhabit the school.

Marsha’s involvement in a building project meant more than just erecting a new school as well, for she, too, needed to spend some time learning how to most effectively combine the sixth grade staff of her second building with the current middle school. Marsha spoke about learning what is involved in bringing a community along during a building project as she related how she had worked with the community to facilitate a greater understanding of the middle school philosophy. She added:

We did the design of the building so we had all the sub-committees looking at what do we want the building to look like, trying to create a place that’s welcoming. One of the big [learnings] for me was thinking about the creation of the teams, creating them into neighborhoods...and create walls that will open up so we can have two rooms or one room. So we have a building that I think will really meet whatever needs we have.

When Sophie spoke about the impact on her learning that the building project, she talked about the time that she had devoted to learning about the intricacies of the process. She indicated that, although it was not part of her job description, the project required a huge time commitment from her and her staff as they matched the school’s vision to the design of the new school. In addition, she spoke about the politics involved

in the project, adding. "... it involves a whole political forum which I would never have even dreamt about when I was going through the administrative course work in college."

### Safety

Only two of the five principals in this study identified safety concerns as a focus for their learning. Sophie identified the need to keep the safety needs of students and staff as a priority as staff and students worked together in a overcrowded building. She attempted to balance the reality of working in an old building with being immersed in a building project for a new building. She indicated that:

Within the building itself, I think that I look at some of my biggest challenges are the safety issues. Just knowing how overcrowded we are and then adding to that all of the issues around violence and family instability that we're living with as a culture...I kind of look at that as my first area of concern.

However, it's important to add that although Sophie mentioned that safety was her "first area of concern," she rarely mentioned it during subsequent interviews.

Betsy, too, identified safety issues as an area in which she focused a part of her learning. Her emphasis on school safety included the introduction of a bullying prevention program as a result of a Bullying Awareness Workshop that she and her School Resource Officer had attended in the summer of 2002. She added that:

We [the resource officer and Betsy] found that most of the [seventh grade] kids had been through a bully prevention program. We did a head count with seventh grade and almost every kid had had a program, which wasn't the case with our eighth graders coming in. We started a program [for the eighth graders] this year, as all our teachers have been trained but we haven't trained the students yet.

Learning about how to help students take care of their own safety in school was aligned to the steps that had been taken in securing the building. Betsy talked about the installation of security doors that forced visitors to come upstairs to check into the main office to obtain a visitor's pass instead of entering directly into the hallways where staff and students congregate. Security cameras had been installed at the main entrance as well.

### Relationships

A common thread that surfaced regarding principals' learning needs was the need to maintain solid relationships with staff and community. Throughout the three interviews, the five women in this study talked about the many, varied connections that they had with staff, for they valued the link between solid relationship building and the ability to move the work forward. Although only one principal identified specific initiatives that helped her examine the effectiveness of her work with staff, all principals wove the importance of doing so into the conversations.

When describing their learning needs, principals invariably used the term 'we' instead of 'I', for many of their learning needs were connected to relational work with staff. Claire talked about the work that she had done with consultants outside of the system to forge a connection between and among staff members after an uncomfortable staff issue that became a media event. She indicated that:

One of the things about a difficult building and a difficult staff is you're constantly digging around in your tool kit to fine out what will work for this kind of thing. It was really interesting to work with Bruce Wellman as he was putting suggestions on the table for the way leaders will lead in the future.

She spoke about learning about effective staff relationships as she worked with a mentor who supplied "...an objective pair of eyes and that wisdom that could draw resources to me, shake me and say, 'This is all wrong.'" She learned about putting a decision-making model in place with team leaders and staff so that "people know what I'm talking about and it's really clear at the start of anything new or big that we're going to clarify how the decision will be made." Her work with her mentor encompassed the teacher evaluation process as well. Regarding her learning about teacher evaluations, Claire shared that:

The other big work that [the consultant] and I crafted together was working on teacher evaluations because my big fear [was] how legitimate can my evaluation process be with me walking on eggshells not trusting [the process]? So one of the things that we developed was a teacher advisory group of very veteran teachers ...we came together and we worked on a variety of things in terms of what are the strengths of the system, what are the weaknesses of the system and let's just talk about what it has been like. So a new appreciation on both sides came out of that because I was working elbow to elbow and shoulder to shoulder with people and they were spreading the word that "No, she's not the bogey man and she does care about us and does care about doing a quality job here and we've got to work together."

Betsy, too, talked about the learning that had taken place regarding the development of effective relationships with staff while she served as assistant principal of her school prior to accepting the position of principal. She referred to the "battles being fought" in the building that had created a tension between the staff and former principal indicating "...it was not something I wanted to have and it's not my style to have." She



added succinctly, “I just try to work on the relationship part,” for she identified the need to develop effective working relationships with staff in order to move the work forward.

Marsha, who had served as principal of her school for only three years, emphasized her need to work on relationships as part of her learning about her new setting. She indicated, “I always feel like it’s almost an education or a learning everyday, all of the people [with whom] I interact and the kinds of conversations I have with them.”

Sophie, like Marsha, had been a guidance counselor before moving into school administration. Although neither she nor Marsha specifically articulated their need to work on effective relationships, it was clear that this remained a priority as it provided the foundation for their work. Sophie referred to the importance of learning how to honor staff’s differences and contributions to the school as she talked her role as “nurturer.” She added that a significant part of her job was to make staff “feel welcome, important, nurtured, and cared for...” as they became assimilated into the school culture.

#### Summary of Learning Needs of Each Principal

The following section summarizes what each principal identified as specific learning needs. Each of the principals in this study identified technology and assessment as topics about which they needed to learn. With one exception, they each had been engaged in formal learning opportunities regarding these topics during the last two years. Three out of the five research participants were immersed in building projects that accounted for much of their time.

Claire indicated that her primary learning focus centered on her work with staff as they struggled through some difficult personnel issues within her building. She constantly referred to the work that she had done with three different consultants over a

period of 10 years regarding learning how to maintain effective working relationships with her staff. Although for the last two years she has not pursued learning opportunities that address this issue, she still describes the topic as her greatest need. Her attendance at a conference on technology for middle level educators matched her identification of technology as an area about which she needed to learn. Although she identified assessment as a learning need, she never referred to it again after the initial interview. Her immersion in a building project accounted for much of her time; however, the learning gained from this experience took place primarily in house with the exception of a site visit to another school.

Betsy, like Claire, spent time learning about technology and assessment. Her learning experiences with assessment were spearheaded by her district's emphasis on the identification of 'target' scores for each student. Together, she and her staff invested learning time into the development of student assessment instruments that focused on the attainment of specific academic goals. Part of this learning involved addressing the academic needs of ESL (English as a Second Language) population as she and her staff struggled with this additional assessment challenge. A second learning goal that Betsy identified was school safety when she talked about her involvement in a bullying prevention program. Additional learning time was devoted to topics regarding literacy and best teaching practices. When asked if she ever pursued learning needs that reflected her personal interests, she indicated that there was not enough time to do so. However, of all the principals involved in this research, Betsy's identified learning needs were most closely aligned with her choices for professional development. Although she did not

mention specific learning initiatives regarding the development of effective working relationships with staff, she recognized its' worth.

Marsha, too, was absorbed in learning about technology and assessment as evidenced by her recent learning experiences. Like Betsy, Marsha and her staff learned together as they explored how to integrate technology into the seventh grade curriculum. In Marsha's case, the learning about assessment was connected to her pursuit of effective curriculum and instruction strategies as she began her third year as a middle school principal after having been a high school principal for many years. In addition, much of Marsha's time was spent traveling between two buildings as part of her involvement in a building project. As she indicated, she had to learn how to bring two schools together and how to keep the community involved as the project evolved. In addition, being relatively new to her position, she recognized the need to learn about the staff and community as she settled into her role. Marsha was the only principal who talked about needing to be selective as she thought about meeting her personal learning needs as she attempted to balance her learning needs with the needs of her family. Having said that, it's interesting to note that of the five principals in the study, Marsha attended the most professional development opportunities.

Annie's expressed learning needs were no different from the other principals as she talked about assessment and technology. The needs of students represented the focus for her learning as she shared her involvement with the development of alternative assessment instruments and her exploration of technology. Unlike the other principals in this study, Annie seemed to have a more global perspective of her learning, accepting or discarding pieces of learning depending on their usefulness to students. As she indicated,

Table 4.3  
Identified Needs and Actual Learning

Name	Events Attended	Identified Need
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left to her own devices she would have given minimal attention to technology; however, the seventh grade laptop initiative forced her hand in that regard.

Sophie identified technology as a major learning need as well as she talked about “a year’s worth of training and immersion” as she and her staff prepared for the seventh grade laptop initiative. In addition, she talked about her involvement on a district assessment committee, but the topic did not appear to be a priority for her. Rather, she emphasized the learning that had taken place as a result of her involvement with the school building project as she learned about the intricacies of the process. Much of her learning needs, specifically assessment and technology, were addressed within the district. In addition, she expressed concern for the issues regarding violence and family instability that contributed to safety concerns in her school. Like Claire, Betsy, and Marsha, she referred to the continued need to learn about the development of effective staff relationships as a foundation for her work. Despite her identification of specific learning needs, the only formal learning opportunity in which she engaged was the Annenberg Institute that focused on the expressed needs of the participants who attended that event.

#### Alignment of Identified Learning Needs to Actual Experiences

A summary of each participant’s unique learning experiences is offered in Table 4.3. This table compares what each principal had identified as a learning need with the learning opportunities in which each had engaged in the year prior to the study (see Table 4.2). The italicized topics represent areas in which identified needs were aligned with learning opportunity choices.

Table 4.3, cont.

Name	Event Attended	Identified Need
Annie	Middle Level Conference NELMS Conference	<i>Middle Level Focus</i> <i>Middle Level Focus</i>
Sophie	Annenberg Institute on Leadership	<i>Staff Relationships</i> Leadership
	District Level Meetings	Safety Technology <i>Building Project</i>

This table suggests that these five principals' identified learning needs do not always align with the choices that they made regarding what learning events to attend. For instance, out of the three conferences and/or workshops that Claire attended, only one reflected her need of learning more about technology. Betsy, on the other hand, attended six learning events, five of which matched her identified needs. Marsha cited nine events that she had attended during the year, three of which were aligned to her identified needs. All five of Annie's choices around professional development were connected to her identified needs of working with middle school students and technology. Sophie, who spent the least time away from her building to attend workshops and/or conferences, was the only principal who attended a summer retreat devoted to school leadership. This learning opportunity may or may not have been aligned to her identified needs based on what the retreat participants identified as areas to explore.

#### How Principals Learn Best

As indicated in previous sections, principals spent the majority of their time interacting with staff and other members of the school community as they addressed the work of schools. In the following section, principals talk more specifically about how they learn best as they share many, varied stories about how their connections with others enhance their learning. In addition, principals talk about the necessity of having support for their learning as well, as they talk about the realities of their interactions with superintendents, other principals, staff, and parents.

### Learning with Others

When describing their learning needs, principals invariably used the term ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ for many of their learning needs were connected to work with staff around a common focus. All five principals in the study emphasized the importance of learning with staff for this is how they spent a significant portion of their learning time as they explored issues regarding assessment and technology.

Claire appreciated an opportunity to attend a workshop with members of her staff. She spoke to the benefits of learning with others as she indicated, “It gives me their thinking as well... but the talk is really good because we really hit on a lot of subjects and I can hear a different perspective that may help shape my thinking.” She added that, “No one has a complete hold over all the information any more,” as she talked about how learning about technology with staff enhanced the learning process. She pointed out that no one in the group understood all of the concepts presented but, as a group, they had enough pooled knowledge to support one another with the new learning. Both Claire and Annie emphasized the benefits of learning and working with others as principals and staff leaned into the challenges of local, state, and federal mandates including technology and assessment. As Annie indicated, working with staff helped develop “a richer sense of the material.”

When Betsy was asked what kind of learning she most enjoyed, she indicated that she preferred learning in an environment where she could interact with other people. Betsy referred to learning collaboratively with others as “the human experience” as she talked about having the opportunity to learn with others on a daily basis. She valued the

opportunity to discuss a common concern where ideas are shared and decisions are made based on input of the group. She talked about having “learned how to make a community out of a group of people” by working with her staff as they read Tony Wagner’s book *Making the Grade: Re-inventing America’s Schools*. She shared that, “I thought that I’m going to do this with teachers and... we read some books and then we talked about it, and it was good!”

Marsha, like Claire, appreciated working with someone who could help her with unfamiliar topics such as technology as it gave her the opportunity to draw on the expertise of others as she explored new learning and experimented with new ideas. Marsha indicated that she also values the learning she experienced regarding “the inner workings of a middle school...students’ needs, and how it all comes together” as they worked together to transition from a junior high concept to a middle school model.

However, Marsha added that she prefers learning about a specific topic when given the opportunity, for she enjoys working with others around a common identified goal. She enjoyed attending workshops or conferences where she had the opportunity to “figure out” a solution to a problem with colleagues rather than discussing “random” ideas that “jump from thing to thing.” This represents a difference in thinking from Claire, Betsy, and Annie, for they valued the potential of connecting ideas from what could appear to be disconnected conversations.

Annie, too, valued the work that she did with staff. She believed that the learning comes from collaboration rather than what she as the principal brings to the group. She indicated that, “Learning is a collective process. You can learn a lot by yourself but unless you share it, you don’t ever test your connections or conclusions or interpretation



to the learning. She talked about how both the veteran teacher and the beginning teacher contribute to the learning of the group, as they bring their strengths to the table. She conceded that not everyone looks at issues or concerns the same way, but that everyone has “something to offer.”

#### Conditions for Learning: Support

When principals were asked what they needed to learn, an unexpected response emerged from the data. Principals expressed the need to be supported in their learning which revealed an interesting perspective to the subject of learning needs. The response to the question was closely aligned to how they learned as they talked about the importance of learning in a supportive environment and of being part of a “team” of learners. On the other hand, they also talked about the need to be supported in their learning beyond collaboration and learning with others. Rather, it seemed to mean having emotional support for learning whether they actually worked together toward a common goal or not. Principals expressed the importance of having staff and superintendents acknowledge, value, and appreciate their learning efforts.

The response data from the first and second interviews were peppered with references about the need for support in order to learn. Their comments regarding this specific learning need fell into three categories, as they talked about the need for support for their learning from (1) the administrative team, (2) the superintendent, and (3) staff.

An important part of learning for Claire was the positive learning environment that existed with the other principals in the district. She spoke about the team’s dedication to their work as they have developed a “strong, supportive environment for each other’s (professional) growth.” She was proud of the fact that the decision to work with Bruce

Wellman regarding the development of relational skills came from this group rather than a mandate from the superintendent.

Annie, like Claire, viewed her administrative team as a support for her learning as well. She valued having a superintendent with whom she shared resources on a regular basis and who shared her views regarding the needs of middle school students. Regarding her administration team, Annie indicated that, "I need to be surrounded with people who are also committed to what they do... who value emerging adolescents."

Conversely, when Sophie was asked what she needed to learn, her comments centered on the absence of a learning environment in her administrative team. This lack of support, she indicated, provided her with the impetus to seek learning opportunities outside of the district. She indicated that:

It would be very uncomfortable to ever bring up anything about something I've read educationally that I think is interesting...probably the least support I receive would be from my administrative team. It's non-existent.

She talked about not feeling "safe" enough to talk about her learning to the administrative team, for the conversations at the administrative team meetings seem to focus on "golf scores or when you're retiring." She indicated that she only attends these meetings because her attendance is expected. She added, "...it's so far from what I think and dream about in my school that I truthfully go there because I'm required to go."

When asked what she would need if she had the opportunity to design her ideal learning environment, she replied that she would like to part of a leadership team where learning was valued and that each participant was appreciated for his/her contribution.

She laments, “In this situation (the present administrative team) there’s really no leadership. It doesn’t exist so it feels like you’re on your own.”

In addition to support from the administrative team, Annie, Claire, and Sophie mentioned the need to have the superintendent’s support to enhance their learning. Annie referred to the reverse side of the coin as she talked about being unable to work with a superintendent who was not supportive of her views. She added:

I would not be able to work with a superintendent who said, “This is what we’re going to do.” It’s top-down, I can’t do it. That’s not a good working situation for me. And I know that I don’t have to stay in a place that’s like that because there are other places out there...I know that’s something that’s not even productive for me for two weeks. It doesn’t work.

Both Claire and Sophie shared, inversely, how their learning needs were not met as they spoke about their respective superintendents. Claire indicated that, “Right now we [the administrative team] feel more hampered by the leadership at the top in terms of where it [the learning] goes and what happens.”

Sophie talked about how her superintendent from a previous district encouraged her need to enhance her learning. She said:

I actually got involved in it [Annenberg] when I worked in a different school system. In that system there was a lot of activity around leadership and a lot of encouragement to look for different types of training that would improve your [leadership] skills. I just approached the superintendent...and he said, “Go for it,” so I did.

She talked about the loneliness that she experiences in her position, for she felt that her passion for learning was not valued and she had no one with whom to share her concerns.

Three out of the five principals talked about the need to have a supportive staff before they could pursue their learning needs. Claire indicated that:

The relationship work that I've done with staff has paid dividends because they'll give me the time now to do that [to pursue outside learning interests] and we have such a connection with one another. In the past they would have said, "That's [Claire] goofing off," but now they say, "No, we know why she's doing it." And they know how good it feels for them to have that kind of opportunity, so they know it's equal in terms of my own growth and development to take time for that [learning].

Marsha, who was relatively new in her position, alluded to her need to have staff be more understanding of what her position entails. Her comments most closely represented a need for support and appreciation for her work. Marsha was talking about an article written in the local paper by the parent of one of her staff members. Reading the article that talked about administrators not earning their salaries, she shared:

So I hadn't seen the article yet so I looked down and I'm reading it and she [staff member] says, "Oh, he [staff member's father] means the superintendent not you." I looked at it and I said to her, "He says administrators don't earn their salaries. You know, whatever he meant, boy, this thing sure reads the other way." And I said [to the staff member], "Everybody else in the community that read this clearly would read it as administrators don't earn their money. Boy, this puts me in really wonderful position because everybody in town knows that you're his

daughter. You work in my building and if your father is making comments that administrators don't earn their money then clearly the message is..." And she said "Oh no, I never meant you! You work so hard I can't believe it!" And I'm thinking, "Yeah, right."

She continued by sharing her concerns regarding the reactions of staff after having been out of the building for a day. She talked about how she had spent her day on administrative tasks that were connected to the needs of the second building for which she was responsible. Her frustration about not feeling supported and appreciated surfaced when she recounted the comments from a staff member. She recounted, "Literally Monday I wasn't even in this building. When I came back, one of the teachers here was whispering, "Well, we were wondering where you were. You know, they always get you down there." Frustrated with that kind of response, she indicated that she would like to say:

"What in hell do you think I do all day?" But what would be the point in that?

"Do you think I'm out shopping? You know I've got two buildings and we're building a third building and you know I'm somewhere here running around like a chicken with my head cut off. Are you really serious, to come back and say that to me?"

Sophie, who was a school counselor before she became an administrator, talked about how it felt for her to have no support from staff in another district. The support that she needed went beyond the need to work together. Rather, she, like Claire, felt unsupported and unappreciated for her work as she spoke about the need for being "liked." She indicated that:

I had never been in a setting where I wasn't liked. It was a pretty new experience for me to be that much... on the outside. I was just hopeful that things would get better if I just gave enough and if I worked hard enough that somehow I would be able to become part of the culture. I couldn't tell you how much I learned [about myself]. I learned how incredibly difficult it is to be in a position where you're ... being rejected. I was wounded by the experience.

Sophie connected this need for support to "being accepted by the culture," indicating that she stayed in that position for seven years, thinking that if she worked long enough and hard enough then she would achieve the acceptance for which she worked so hard. However, she never got what she truly needed, being the support and appreciation from the staff. So after seven years of "hardship and agony," she moved on.

#### Summary of How Principals Learn Best

The intent of Chapter 4 was to introduce five women middle school principals in Maine and how they describe and identify their learning needs. In summary, the principals in this study:

- Learned best by working with others;
- Valued learning opportunities that had direct correlation with their work in schools;
- Needed to feel supported for their work;
- Did not always pursue learning opportunities that reflected their identified needs.

Claire, Marsha, Betsy, and Annie identified the need to learn with others as they explored the concepts regarding assessment and technology. Claire, Annie and Betsy

recognized how working with others toward a common goal enhanced the learning, for they valued the different perspectives that individuals brought to the table. When sharing specific learning needs, both Claire and Sophie prioritized their work with staff in helping their respective schools to establish a cohesive unit. Annie, like Claire, appreciated the learning that took place with her administrative team including the superintendent. She referred to this group as a “network” of learners that shared resources with one another on a regular basis.

Although principals found it difficult to leave their buildings in order to pursue their identified learning needs, they recognized that when they did elect to attend a conference or workshop, the learning needed to be something that could be immediately applied to their work. As Annie indicated, the learning must be meaningful and manageable. However, principals found it challenging to apply their learning to their work as they had little time to reflect upon what they had learned and what it meant to their work. As Claire indicated, upon returning from a workshop, “you have to hit the deck running.”

Principals frequently talked about the need to be supported in their work that seemed to reflect a greater need for appreciation than for learning in collaboration with others. Principals expressed the need to be valued at some level, either by teachers, other principals, and/or the superintendent. Claire, Sophie, and Annie talked about the importance of being part of a learning “team” whether at the building level or the district administrative level. This identified need encompassed both how principals felt they did their best learning and the importance of feeling supported, appreciated, and valued for their contributions. On the other hand, both Marsha and Sophie talked about how it felt

not to be supported by staff, suggesting that staff did not always appreciate or value their work or their learning. Sophie's need to be supported at some level was evident as she talked about having administrative support in another district but not being supported by staff. In her current setting, she expressed frustration about the lack of administrative support, yet felt strongly supported by staff.

As principals talked about their learning needs, it was interesting to note that what they had identified as a learning need did not always match what they had elected to pursue. The line between the specific learning needs and how principals indicated they learn best became blurred as principals talked about their experiences assessment and the building of effective staff relationships which was a constant focus. All five principals consistently mentioned the importance of learning with and from staff, but with the exception of Claire, rarely mentioned the need to learn about how to do this more effectively.

In Chapter 5, the research findings will connect what principals have shared regarding their specific learning needs and how they define meaningful learning experiences. In addition, this chapter will explore the link between principals' learning and the evidence that reflects that learning.



## CHAPTER 5: PRINCIPALS TALK ABOUT MEANINGFUL LEARNING AND EVIDENCE OF LEARNING

### Overview

The previous chapter contained descriptors about what principals felt they needed to learn in addition to details about how they felt they learned best. This chapter will go beyond the literal to the abstract as principals move away from describing their needs to reflecting about the learning experiences that were most valuable to them. In addition, principals will be asked to address how their learning influenced their respective schools, and what artifacts existed that reflected their learning as they responded to the following research questions:

1. How do principals define valuable learning experiences?
2. What impact has principals' learning experiences had upon their practice?

The following sections are closely intertwined, for they represent principals' views regarding meaningful learning experiences and the challenges inherent in the pursuit of that learning. For the most part, principals in this study indicated that the most valuable learning experiences were directly aligned with current initiatives in their schools. However, what seems particularly interesting is that principals found it easier to talk about the reasons they were not able to engage in meaningful learning experiences rather than articulate how they had successfully addressed specific learning needs. Principals repeatedly referred to the time constraints imposed by fulfilling the perceived role of principal as a reason for not addressing their identified needs. In addition, they spoke to the tension created by choosing to be a present in the building as opposed to taking advantage of learning opportunities outside of the building. They added, however,

that the learning opportunities that they did choose to attend during the school year were most often related to topics that needed their immediate attention such as technology or assessment. They added that the nature of learning opportunities during the school year was often less meaningful for they did not provide enough time in a one or two-day workshop or conference to explore a topic in depth.

One principal indicated that it was “not worth it” to leave the building for a workshop or conference, because of what might happen in her absence. Frequently principals referred to either taking work home or finding time to learn independently in order to keep up with the demands of the role, indicating that there was simply no time to complete some tasks while in the building.

#### Valuable Learning Experiences

During the second interview, principals were asked to talk about what constituted meaningful learning opportunity when they were asked, “What has been your most valuable learning experience?” For the most part, principals in the study indicated that in order for learning to be valuable, it needed to be applicable to their work. Claire indicated, “...there’s no time to study the material when you get back from a workshop. You’re hitting the floor running with it, so it has to be the kind of thing you can immediately incorporate to what’s already there.”

When asked about a valuable learning experience, Claire talked about her work with Bruce Wellman regarding data-driven dialogues in education. Although the topic was valuable, she indicated that it was more meaningful because she attended the workshop with the entire administrative team. She indicated that, “...working with my colleagues, I had a chance to work with them and to get what would be a richer sense of

the material.” In Claire’s eyes, the combination of having the opportunity to work with colleagues and learn about a topic that had direct application to her school represented a valuable learning experience.

Betsy, Marsha, and Annie had all recently attended technology training sessions. Betsy, like Claire, inferred that the learning be applicable to current building initiatives as she talked about being part of a district-wide technology training session in which she had participated during the summer of 2002. “You need to know the technology part,” she added as she reflected on Governor King’s laptop initiative for seventh graders. Another valuable learning initiative for Betsy was her participation in a series of workshops that took place over two years time that advocated the development of a standards-based grading system. This experience supported the assessment work to which her district was committed. She added:

The hard thing is, unfortunately, I think we operate so much in crisis because time is at such a premium. You go to these sort of crisis things that you’re saying I need to get more up to speed on that... those take priority.

Annie spoke of a learning opportunity in which she had engaged during July of 2001 and August of 2002 that involved technology. When she talked about valuable learning experiences in this regard, she indicated that “Left to my own devices, I would learn about technology for work processing, e-mail, and searching some things on the web-doing things that are personally satisfying to me.” Workshops regarding technology represented valuable learning experiences for both Betsy and Annie because they had direct application to their work.

Marsha had recently collected 18 contact hours of technology training during her first two years as a middle school principal. She, like Betsy and Annie, had identified this as valuable learning for she recognized the need to enhance her technological skills given the emphasis on technology as a result of Governor King's laptop initiative. In addition, she talked about having been immersed in a CAS (Certificate of Advanced Study) program with a focus on middle level education as she prepared to move from high school administration to middle school administration. She shared that this learning was connected to a specific goal that made it a valuable learning experience. Marsha also talked about having taken a course in mediation that reflected a personal interest to her. Of the five principals in this study, only Marsha and Sophie mentioned selecting learning opportunities that were not connected to a building or system need.

When Betsy was asked to relate a valuable learning experience, her response differed significantly from the responses of the other principals. She indicated that the time she spent learning was most valuable when she could collect a variety of resources on a specific topic. For example, she mentioned that attending large conferences where a keynote speaker addressed 300 people or more was not her cup of tea; however, she found it valuable to attend the exhibitions at those conferences to get a sense of the materials that were available to support existing initiatives.

Principals indicated that when they made the decision to take time out of the school day to attend a workshop or conference, they looked for specific topics that informed their work immediately. According to Claire, she had little time during the school year to engage in the kind of learning that had not been directed to a specific purpose. She said, "...there's another strand running through my thinking in terms of

how does this apply and what does all of it look like to me... I find myself behaving differently at those because I'm constantly looking for nuggets that I can use right then and there..."

As Marsha talked about attending one or two-day workshops and/or conferences during the school year, she labeled the learning "reactionary," for, like Claire, she felt that the learning had to meet some immediate need. She said:

I take the stuff that I need when I need it. Even when I think about the Maine Principals' Conference...I'll probably choose one that I think I really need, something where I think, "Omigod, this is a hot one, I really need to know about this because it's happening right now."

Annie looked for application for her learning as well as she talked about connecting pieces of learning to the existing "framework" of her knowledge about a specific topic. She summed up her thinking by saying, "I always keep asking too good of a question: Is it meaningful and is it manageable?"

Sophie was able to identify valuable learning experiences beyond those that had direct application in her work. She talked about her membership in a variety of groups to be her most valuable learning experiences, for she is exposed to a lot of different ideas that she indicates "feed your spirit." She specifically mentioned her committee work with the Maine Principals' Association, referring to the group as a creative "think tank" that liked to read, learn new things, and share ideas. She appreciated the group's "openness to new ideas," indicating how they support one another through frequent e-mail contact. To Sophie, her connection to this group represented the kind of learning environment that she greatly valued in her work. It is interesting to note that Sophie was adamant about

using her summer to meet her learning needs rather than take time out of the school year. When asked to identify learning opportunities in which she had engaged in the year prior to this study, she listed only two events that she had attended, one of which took place in the summer. The other learning opportunity represented a forced choice experience as it was connected to the building project in her district.

Claire, Sophie and Annie valued the learning that comes from working with a group of committed professionals who support one another in the work. The valuable learning experiences that Annie mentioned were a challenge to extract from her conversations, for they were so varied. As she indicated during her interviews, “I think out loud” as she proceeded to expound upon her involvement with staff, her teaching in the University of Maine system, her work at the state level regarding portfolio development for special education students, and her attendance at a Grant Wiggins workshop. For Annie, any initiative where she had the opportunity to share and shape her ideas with others was valuable. The commonality of her valuable learning experiences lay in the excitement and energy she experienced from working collaboratively and cooperatively with others. However, she added that she also valued the time that she devoted to learning at home. She spent her evening and weekends reading books, articles and/or journals rather than spending time away from the building to attend a workshop or conference.

The flip side of the coin regarding valuable learning is what principals identified as learning experiences that they did not find valuable. Principals talked about attending one or two-day workshops that gave them little opportunity to explore a topic in depth. Both Betsy and Marsha expressed frustration about not having the luxury of exploring a

topic in depth during the school year. Betsy added, "... maybe the sad part about that is just that there's not enough time [during the school year] to get into any depth."

Regarding the lack of depth of learning, Marsha said, "I'm always getting little snippets of things. I can't tell whether the job leads one there or that's who I am and maybe I'm in this job because it's a snippet job."

Claire talked about a workshop with Bruce Wellman when she indicated, "... we had hoped to work with [him] in the summertime but he wasn't available, so this last week we did two days with him even though it meant pulling us out of the building to do that. We were not able to go as deeply as we'd want to go." Although all five principals identified the need to develop effective relationships with staff, Claire was the only one who participated in a specific relationship-building initiative. However, working with Wellman was a collaborative decision made by the district's administrative team in the district consisting of the other school principals.

When talking about learning experiences that were not valuable, Claire was reminded of how narrow her learning has been regarding topics that are not education related. She recounted an incident regarding a conference that she had attended which included discussions of topics that were more global instead of being focused on schools and the responsibilities of the principalship. She added:

I... stayed at a retreat... there was a retired professor of economics and another person who taught economics... it was a mixed group of very professional people who showed up for this particular week. I realized, listening to them talk... that they had a whole host of things to talk about beyond their work. Unfortunately for me, all of my time is devoted to my work... it's really a narrow focus. There's a

whole big world out there, they were talking politics and I thought, ‘This conversation is so detailed that I can’t take part in it.’

### Summary

The following table summarizes principals’ identification of learning experiences that they considered as valuable:

Table 5.1

#### Learning Preferences

	Claire	Betsy	Marsha	Sophie	Annie
Immersion	X			X	
Direct Application	X	X	X		X
Connected to Goal			X		
Learning w/Others	X			X	X
Collect Resources		X			
Enhancing Leadership					X

This snapshot of principals’ valuable learning experiences indicates that four out of five principals identified experiences that had direct application to their work. Claire, Betsy, Marsha and Annie viewed valuable learning opportunities as those that were applicable to the current initiatives in their buildings. Having the opportunity to learn with others was identified by Claire, Sophie, and Annie as a characteristic of a valuable learning experience, particularly for Sophie who valued interactions that ‘fed her spirit.’ Marsha was the only principal who identified a learning opportunities that reflected a personal interest; however it is important to note that this learning took place before she became a principal. As principals shared their most valuable learning experiences, with the



exception of Sophie, what seems to be missing is any reference to opportunities that enhanced their leadership skills.

### Barriers to Learning

During the interviews, principals identified a variety of challenges that presented barriers to their learning. They emphasized how the expectations of the principal's role left little time to pursue learning opportunities that were not directly related to their work. They talked about the tension created by leaving the school building to attend a learning event, wondering what kinds of issues and concerns they might find at their door upon their return. Principals shared the frustration of not being able to cover a topic in depth in a one or two day workshop or to find time to commit to a university course. As one principal lamented, when she returned to her school after having attended a conference or workshop, there was no time to reflect upon her learning. She added that if the information could not be readily applied to existing initiatives, it would be lost. The following section shares principals' perceptions of their challenges as they balance their learning needs with the realities of their work.

### Expectations of Staff and Parents

As Claire thought about the expectations of her position, she talked about how making herself available to staff and students influences her day when she said, "This [having a conversation] is a very typical thing. I can get started on my day and lunch happens about three o'clock because I'm engaged in these conversations with people...I don't mind." However, she continued by voicing her frustration with the time it took to do her job as she outlined how she spent her day, emphasizing that there is no such thing as a 'typical' day. She talked about responding to the needs of others from the minute she

enters the building at 7:00 AM, as she invariably found someone at her door who needed her attention. She accepted the responsibility of finding enough substitutes to cover unexpected staff absences and being available to do morning announcements. She tries to remain connected to students as well as she answers their questions as they come to the office. Once the bell rung and students and teachers were in the classrooms, she had a variety of meetings to which she had committed her time including team meetings and meetings outside of the building.

Betsy, like Claire, talked about how she makes time for staff and how that choice influenced the time that she had to spend learning new things. She shared how she was unable to find the time to learn how to operate the video camera to take pictures of graffiti on the bathroom wall which was an immediate need for her and, therefore, meaningful. She explained:

We'll have a threat written on the bathroom wall, well, now I have a digital camera. I'll take a picture of it and print it out. We caught a kid, this kid wrote a threat, a bomb threat, and put it on the teacher's desk... that took all day. See that's the thing... it takes all day and that was for two of us [the principal and the assistant principal].

Betsy's conversations were filled with anecdotes about how she spent her day either immersed in the details of the position like working with the assistant principal on a discipline issue, making herself available for conversations with staff, and managing the day-to-day building functions. She talked about the day that she walked into the building to find the custodian on the doorstep. The fumes from the furnace forced an evacuation of a wing and black smoke was billowing from the chimney. Meaningful learning

experiences clearly took a back seat to the immediate demands of the position, for she accepted the responsibility of managing each of these details as integral to her responsibilities as a principal. Betsy lamented, “There isn’t time. Time is... the biggest factor in all this.”

Principals were also greatly influenced by the staff’s expectation that they be in the building. There was a price to be paid for choosing to leave the building to pursue learning experiences, as Marsha’s story reveals. She expressed anguish at having a staff member say to her, “Oh, do you still work here?” after she had been out of her building for an entire day. The teacher’s reaction spoke to the principals’ need to balance personal and professional learning needs with the reaction of staff. Claire echoed this concern when talking about how long it had taken to change the staff’s perception that she was, as she said, “goofing off” whenever she left the building. Both Sophie and Claire talked about making sure that they conducted the morning announcements so that staff and students could feel their presence in the building.

As Betsy reflected on the expectations of staff and parents, she shared, “They say, ‘Do you have a minute?’ and the minute expands.” She adds, “It’s things like that... a parent will come in first thing in the morning, they want to discuss a grade or some problem, and they always come right before announcements and they expect you to be there...”

### Being Present in the School

Remaining in the building is an expectation for which principals have held themselves accountable. Principals expressed a reluctance to leave the building, feeling that they should be on site to handle whatever difficulty arose. Betsy talked about the difficulty leaving the building during the school year to take advantage of the a learning opportunity when she said:

As a district we had some choices last June for tech training and there was a group of us in [the strand] Using Data for Decision Making...we worked on databases as a preliminary thing. They [the district] often offer courses on that [during the school year] but you know, you're missing days during the school year...and, to me, that's difficult to do.

From Marsha's perspective, it was often not worth leaving the building given the issues that she encountered upon her return. She pointed out that even one or two-day events can be challenging, as events occur that she felt might have been avoided or minimized had she been in the building. She indicated:

If you look at trying to do things for your own professional development during the day...you come back and all of a sudden there are these teachers fighting and this has happened while you've been gone. Some parent is up in arms...so you play catch up. I think looking back over my career, what I did is I started to try to do less of that stuff because I found there was such a clean-up after I was gone that it wasn't worth it to go to the two-day 504 workshop or whatever.

She talked having attended a series of meetings over a week's time connected to her involvement with the Maine Principals' Association. Marsha, who was the only principal who mentioned the difficulty of balancing family and work, related a conversation with her husband regarding the results of her decision to be out of the building. She shared, "I told him that I was so stressed because there was a million things piling up, people were asking me questions, did I sign this form or whatever."

Marsha recognized the difficulty of balancing, her need to be out of the building, with the price she might have to pay for being gone. Regarding her indecision, she shared:

It's funny. I've had three or four things on my desk since school started. One of them [the workshops] was on an assessment conference in October. It was early in September and I said, 'That's perfect, it's the middle of October, I'm up for that. I really want to have a couple of days where I immerse myself in a whole conversation around assessment.' I pushed it around here so many times, do I go, do I go, do I go? I haven't signed up for it.

Sophie has made the decision to meet her learning needs by taking time out of her summer, for like Betsy and Marsha, she expressing a reluctance to leave her school for fear of what might happen in her absence. When asked if she had anything to add, she said:

There's one thing that I think you're missing and that is that there are times when I'm very interested in learning new things that involve me being outside of the building that I feel I can't do because of things I feel I need to be here for. It's almost a luxury to go and concentrate on my own learning which is why the

summer appeals to me so much because I can actually be away and not worry about getting called with the day-to-day things that go on.

### The Overlap of School to Home

An additional expectation that principals have accepted as part of their reality is taking work home in the evening or over the weekend since principals indicate that there is not enough time in the day to complete their work at school. Both Claire and Betsy talked about the work that they took home in the evening and over the weekend in order to complete their responsibilities. Annie talked about the time she devoted to learning at home in addition to her other responsibilities when she said, “On the weekend I try to do two hours of professional reading and keep up to date. I really block that time out...it’s a joy, really, at this point in time for me.” During the conversation, she talked about the education journals to which she subscribed, saying, “I read those at home, not at school,” pointing out that she doesn’t read every article, but skims for what she needs. She also uses her time at home to read books about leadership that she and other members of the administrative team share as she talks about “trying to explore leadership in a different way.”

When Marsha was asked about her learning beyond the school day, she talked about completing her CAS (Certificate of Advanced Studies) during the time that she served as an assistant principal, indicating that “...as a principal, I wouldn’t have had the time.” Marsha was the only principal who mentioned a frustration with the coursework in which she had been involved to either keep current in educational issues, keep her certification, or get an advanced degree. She compared the requirements of her learning, which took place primarily after the school day, to the learning opportunities in which

people in business participated which took place during the work week. She questioned the relevancy of her written work and the impact the innumerable papers that she wrote had on her practice. She talked about the structure of professional development for educators and the time that is required to do so when she added:

I think part of it is that we spend tremendous amounts of time taking courses because...we're in the profession of course-type stuff. You look at most other people, they do seminars and stuff, but in business, you might get an MBA [Masters in Business Administration] but then beyond that you don't [do coursework], you do seminars...I'm not sure about all those papers I wrote on Sunday afternoons or eleven o'clock at night...it's mind-boggling when you think about the presentations we put together and the papers we wrote and the projects we worked on with other people... think about your own personal life, the amount of time... how many people outside of our profession [do this]. I remember going on vacation with [the lawyer and her husband] once, I'm writing a paper, I'm on a gorgeous beach somewhere writing a paper..... and in the airport, we couldn't get out because of a storm in Boston... [my husband, my friend and her husband] are sitting at the bar having a good time and I'm writing a paper in the airport half the night because.....I knew the thing was due in four days.

She continued by explaining why it was so difficult to take courses as a principal when she talked about the logistics of leaving school in time to get to the university to take a course. She added, "In order to do the university courses and get in there for four o'clock in the afternoon, it's so stressful because I'm not ever out of here by four o'clock." Marsha, who was the only principal who talked about the challenge of

balancing family with the principalship, added that taking a course meant being out another night and taking another slice out of family time.

In summary, this section reviewed how principals' expectations of their roles leaves little time to attend a conference or workshop. Principals seem to have accepted the responsibility of spending their time in the building to connect with staff, make the decisions, manage the students, and take home whatever work doesn't get accomplished during the school day. The real and perceived expectations of the role of principal continued to be a barrier against engaging in meaningful learning. Principals questioned how they could find the time to pursue their learning needs in a meaningful way given the demands of their position.

Principals indicated that if they were going to be out of the building, it had to meet a specific need, for being out of the building, as Marsha indicated in chapter four, was "not worth it." Keeping a pulse on what was happening in the building and attending to the endless details of the position seemed to take priority over taking advantage of learning opportunities out of the building. Principals in this study have accepted the responsibility for handling everything that comes their way from calling the substitutes to responding to crises. However, they use the same reactive approach to their learning as they do the events that fill their days. While they quickly take responsibility for the details, they take less responsibility for their learning. Learning seems to remain a luxury not a priority, for it has become something that happens when principals can fit it in.



### Impact of Principals' Learning

During the third interview, principals were asked to specifically identify artifacts in their respective buildings that showcased the results of their learning. This question represented a challenge to principals, for they referred to their work with staff as a 'human' artifact, but appeared defensive when asked to identify tangible artifacts. For example, they could refer to the meetings that they had facilitated to learn about a new math curriculum, but felt that they had nothing tangible in place to represent the learning. Claire, Marsha, Betsy and Annie called attention to the human artifact when they spoke about the changes that were evident in their buildings in terms of what they had learned about effective leadership rather than specific learning events.

#### Artifacts Representing Organizational Structure

When Claire thought about artifacts, she talked about how the perceptions of the community had changed as a result of the work that she had done with staff. She indicated that she wished she had more tangible artifacts to demonstrate the building changes during her 12 years as principal. However, she pointed out that the time that she had invested in honing her leadership skills was evident in how staff related to one another and how they conducted themselves in their work. She spoke about the inadequacy of the 'paper trail' to reflect that changes that had been made over time. However, she indicated that outsiders coming in could witness a change in how business was done. She stated that:

I think that that's [collecting artifacts] one of our weaker points...not just for people outside but for ourselves to reach back and touch...a larger artifact you would see that would reveal a lot of information would be in the structural sense.

The schedule certainly reflects the work because I'm ecstatic that we have the technology teacher out of the lab and out teaching in classrooms; I think that's a huge artifact because it's a huge shift. And then I think the other thing that would need to bear a lot of fruit in terms of somebody from outside looking at how we've changed would be to attend our team meetings and listen to how our teachers work together.

Claire, Marsha, Annie, and Sophie spoke about having outsiders witness the attitudes and interactions among staff members to show evidence of their learning. Each of them suggested that an observer looking for artifacts of her learning might benefit from attending a staff meeting. When referring to the presence of tangible artifacts that reflect her work, Claire indicated, "...it's not me standing and delivering all the time; people are really asking for that time for other things besides being talked to, and that's a huge shift for staff." She talked about the changes that community members who had attended the school when it was a junior high school might see and appreciate as they realized how the school had moved beyond its negative reputation in the community.

When Betsy was asked what made it possible for her learning to come to fruition in her school, she spoke about the less visible artifacts that demonstrated her learning and her leadership. She referred to a staff attitude that supports conducting the business of school in a different way. She said, "I think it's the condition in the school, where the school is at. If you want to do something new or different or just improve on something, there has to be a feeling that things don't always have to be the same."

Annie also spoke about how students demonstrated her learning, which she adds, “... can’t always be quantified and tangible.” She shared an incident that had happened during a seventh grade leadership event, adding:

I think there has to be evidence somewhere, but it’s different kinds of evidence. For instance, last week I was at Kiev with our seventh grade students and was asked to come up in the evening and help with some discipline. When it [the presentation] was done, [a Kiev staff member] said, ‘I really enjoyed watching how you did that!’ So I think there’s evidence in his observation, but there’s nothing really tangible to hold on to, but that conversation was evidence... it’s about setting a tone or climate.

When Sophie talked about identifying artifacts of her learning, she, like Claire and Marsha, encouraged an observer to look to staff for the evidence. Both she and Annie mentioned the importance of recognizing the development of “climate” as an artifact of principals’ learning. Like Annie, Sophie referred to the importance of the climate that she has created as a result of her learning over time. The evidence for this work could be shown through her daily connection with staff and students that helped in the development of a effective school environment. She shared that:

I believe that it’s important for me to be on the intercom every morning. I feel strongly that I want to have that daily presence of wishing everybody a good day even if my words are brief. I want to be sure that they’re [the words] out there so that the adults in the school and the students know that I really do care about them and I want them to have a good and productive day.

When asked if she thought artifacts of her learning existed in her building, she, like Claire, spoke to the structure of the school environment as evidence. She added:

I think I would say yes to that because what I've tried to do here is set up a structure that is open to everybody's learning, and that to me means that many of the things that I've either read or observed or heard from other people, I've tried to implement here.

#### Tangible Artifacts of Principals' Learning

Although Marsha was able to talk about the evidence of her learning in terms of the changes in how staff approached the work regarding the laptop initiative, she felt that she, personally, had little to show for the work when she said, "...but I have nothing that shows that I am 'X' smarter in the way of technology." She wondered if whether or not she had learned how to do a Power Point presentation would supply more tangible 'evidence' of her learning. She continued by saying that she would like to go away from a learning experience knowing that, "I had dug into it enough so I've got a pretty good sense of the area."

Annie skirted the question about tangible artifacts by taking a more abstract approach to her learning. Regarding having tangible proof of the impact of her learning, she spoke about how her learning was not easily separated into discreet parts. She cautioned:

It's not as if everything has to result in a product, but has it helped us to get further down the journey that we're on....so that's where I think you see evidences of the work. Another thing, I think it [the learning] may be parts of

other things rather than an isolated strategy. I can't think of anything I've done as an administrator that is an isolated thing.

Sophie, too, was hard pressed to identify a specific artifact that reflected her learning, but was able to connect an artifact to how she maintained connections to her staff. When asked to give an example of how she had implemented a structure to support learning in her building, she continued by saying:

One thing that I do on a weekly basis is try to attach something for my staff to read. I write a weekly newsletter so that my faculty meetings can be more professional development rather than just giving them memos of information. So my weekly newsletter contains a lot of the day to day nuts and bolts they need, but along with that I attach some professional reading. It's my way of sharing with them-not requiring them [to read], but giving them something that either I have read myself and found interesting or I feel that's very informative.

When Marsha responded to this question, it was as if she had to take a step back and search for an adequate response. She wondered if some of the committee work that she has facilitated somehow demonstrated what she had learned, but decided that as evidence of her learning, it fell short of the mark. She shared:

Yeah, there's nothing. When I look at the math committee and the amount of time that's really been spent talking math, the meetings I go to around math. I feel like I really have learned a lot more about math instruction, and there's nothing. If I left here and went out to say, 'This is who I am,' I suppose the one thing that I actually have is at least I'm a facilitator, I'm a chair or whatever you want to call me of the committee, so I can at least go forth and say I facilitated for two years a

math initiative. When I think a lot of times of people who have been part of it and they can't even attach that piece. There's nothing to show for it.

As she explored the concept of evidence of her learning, Marsha connected it to the recertification process and the internship that is required for the superintendency. She said:

I needed to have artifacts of certain things. I was writing a synopsis of an article or something like that and I was thinking, "Why am I doing this? Am I doing it because it's really going to help me think about the article and get something on paper which has value, or am I doing it so that I've got something to show that I've done the reading?" To me, a lot of times the artifact piece has been almost fake. When I think about putting my portfolio together for recertification, your certificate that you've attended this or that...so what? But I've got it in there to say that I can show you I've done 'X' in the area of finance. In truth, more learning probably takes place when I sit through a budget hearing at the school board and I'm listening to people argue about this or that...but I can't put on paper...but it's probably been as good a learning as the five [credits] I would have picked up by taking school finance. When I'm presenting a budget, I'd better be able to do it in a way that shows that I understand the financial workings of both this building and the district. If I can't do that, then that says more about my learning than whether I took school finance and got an 'A' in it.

When asked if she thought learning took place even though there were no concrete artifacts, Betsy replied, "I think it [learning] happens, it just might not be evident at this point, or you're just not using it." She, like Annie, indicated that although

the result of her learning wasn't always demonstrated concretely, it was present in her leadership. She concluded, "I'm a compilation of all the experiences and learning that I've done and hopefully I'm doing a better job now than I did 10 years ago."

Betsy, on the other hand, was virtually the only principal who had specific artifacts in hand as result of the system's emphasis on target learning for all students. She talked about how teachers have posted the 'target' scores, using a number system instead of student names, for all to see, indicating that "We have more kids making the honor roll than, at least at first glance, last year." Regarding the learning that she had achieved as a result of the testing initiative, she indicated that the learning had been a forced choice. She said, "It's a system thing and something that I'm responsible for. The superintendent will say, "How are they doing? Show me."

When asked about additional tangible evidences of her learning, she connected the evidence to specific initiatives in her school when she added, "We have a bullying initiative that we're working on and, of course, we have the laptops."

As indicated by the responses, principals struggled, with the exception of Betsy, with identifying tangible artifacts in their building that represented their learning. Instead, they talked about their leadership and how it influenced how their respective staff worked together. Principals heard in this research question the implied expectation that there be tangible artifacts of their work, creating discomfort and, in some cases, defensiveness.

Betsy was the one principal who was able to produce tangible results of her learning in the form of student assessment. However, it is important to note that the impetus for this work came as a result of the superintendent's directive. That's not to

imply that she would not have chosen to explore assessment on her own, but it is not clear whether the same evidences of the learning would have been in existence.

### Summary

In summary, Chapter 5 is intended to provide clarity regarding principals' views about their learning both individually and collectively. Principals stated that in order for learning experiences to be considered as valuable, they preferred that the learning have direct application to their work. A second important consideration was having enough time to explore a topic in depth rather than attend a one or two day learning.

When asked to identify artifacts of their learning, principals struggled with their responses. Principals found it much easier to talk about what was lacking in valuable learning experiences, as they talked about the difficulty of finding time to be out of their buildings to pursue their learning needs. Claire, Betsy, Marsha, and Sophie talked about an unwillingness to leave the building, accepting responsibility it seems, for every person and event that happened during the day. Remaining in the building and attending to the managerial demands of the principals' position seemed to take priority over learning outside of the building during the school day.

In most cases, principals talked about their influence in developing as Annie indicated, a positive "tone and climate" in their respective buildings. When asked to identify tangible evidence of their learning, it seemed clear that the development of effective working relationships took precedent over, for example, the implementation of a new math curriculum. Marsha went so far as to minimize tangible artifacts of her learning, comparing artifacts to earning an 'A' in School Finance and how it did not necessarily mean that she could construct a budget. Betsy was the only principal who



could produce an artifact of her work with assessment represented by the results of students' test results. However, this learning was a result of a 'need to know,' per the superintendent's directive rather than learning that she had pursued out of choice. It was surprising that Marsha was the only principal who inferred that the needs of the family be taken into consideration.

As Claire and Annie talked about the time they spent at home attending to professional reading, it seemed to reinforce the notion that learning was something that principals pursued after their work was completed. Sophie's deliberate decision to pursue learning opportunities primarily during the summer seems to support this view.

The data recorded in this chapter lays the foundation for Chapter 6 that will attempt to put the data in perspective in terms of how it relates to the principals' practice and pertinent research. Chapter 6 will examine the alignment between principals' expressed needs and the choices they have made regarding their learning. An analysis of the data will explore the perceived role of the principal and how that plays out in practice and how that role influences their learning.

## CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### Overview

The final chapter of this dissertation presents a summary of my findings based on an examination and analysis of the research questions. The issues and concerns of the participants in this study will be forged into a holistic view of how these women attend to their learning needs given the complexities of their positions. In addition to a review of the problem statement and the research methodology that guided this study, this chapter contains an explanation of the limitations that influenced the work and the research findings. The chapter concludes with a section that contains the emerging themes of the research and the suggested implications, examining how principals balance management and leadership roles as they pursue their learning needs.

### The Problem Revisited

The expectations of school principals have risen dramatically over the last 20 years. Principals are expected to attend to the managerial details of the school and the staff, maintain the position of effective school leader, while finding time for their own professional learning and growth. The challenge for principals is to effectively balance the roles of leader, learner, and manager in a manner that meets the needs of the principal and the needs of the school.

In Maine, the learning initiatives that offer opportunities for reflection and collaboration such as the Maine Principals' Academy and the Maine School Leadership Network recognize that school leaders' learning needs can not standardized despite the commonality of the issues and challenges that face them. The individual learning needs of principals have been examined in a variety of research studies (Roberts, 1997; Forsyth

& Tallerico, 1998; Goddard, 1997; Walker, Mitchel, & Turner, 1999), but once the data is aggregated, the individual needs of each principal are often lost in the process. It is critical that the specific needs of school principals continue to be examined one principal at a time in order to maintain an accurate sense of the increasing challenges of schools, school leadership, and principals' learning. Given the increased complexity of the principals' role and the unique circumstances in which each principal works, it is appropriate to examine principals' specific learning needs from the inside out by asking principals to identify their learning needs and to explore the learning that they find meaningful. Only by listening to principals' stories can we get a sense of how principals balance the managerial aspects of the position while continuing to learn about their leadership.

### The Research Design

In order to collect insights into the varied learning needs of school principals, a qualitative study was conducted during the 2001-2002 school year. The study focused on five Maine women principals who served middle school students. The study explored four research questions as follows:

1. What do principals feel they need to learn?

This question explores what topics principals identified as their specific learning needs as they are connected building needs and/or system needs.

2. What do principals say about how they learn?

This question focuses on what conditions need to be present to maximize principals' learning.

3. How do principals identify meaningful learning experiences?

The purpose of this question was to explore the connection, if any, between principals identified learning needs and settings and their actual learning experiences. In addition, responses to the question were examined to determine commonalities into what principals identify as valuable learning.

4. What impact has principals' learning had upon their practice?

This question explored how principals' learning had influenced their schools. Principals were asked to identify artifacts in their buildings that showcased their learning.

Each principal selected for the research met specific criteria regarding gender, number and grade levels of students served, and accessibility to the researcher. It was determined that focusing on women in this study would help avoid any actual or implied comparisons between the leadership styles of women versus men. In addition, each of the women in this study were middle school principals which provided an additional common variable.

Through a series of three structured interviews that began in the fall of 2002 and ended in December of the same year, data was collected that addressed the research questions while exploring the realities of the principals' positions. The insights gained as a result of this study revealed the complexities of the principal's role and the real and perceived roadblocks to the pursuit of principals' learning needs.

With any study, certain limitations became evident within the study that influence the quality and generalization of its findings. The limitations fell into seven categories as described below.

First, the research consisted exclusively of interviews that contained the beliefs and perceptions of five women principals with little direct triangulation with other factors. Therefore, the data were difficult to validate.

Second, the size of the study was an additional limitation as it made it more of a challenge to generalize the findings to the larger population of all principals. The commonalities of attitudes and beliefs that may have surfaced by using a larger sample may have had more significance had the sample been larger.

Third, the voices of men in leadership were absent from this research which may have produced very different results as evidenced by the beliefs and attitudes that were revealed when male principals were interviewed during the Pilot Study.

Fourth, as the interview responses of principals were examined after the completion of the data collection, it was apparent that some opportunities to probe more deeply into principals' responses regarding their learning were not pursued. In attempting to maintain a consistent line of questioning with each principal, opportunities were missed that might have explored topics that could have taken the conversation into new and varying directions. It would have been helpful to schedule a fourth interview for the purpose of asking questions that arose as a result of a careful examination of the transcribed responses. Research reliability was compromised by the unevenness of the data in this regard.

Fifth, in the initial stages of the research development it was assumed that the results of principals' learning would be reflected in a tangible way within the building. The fourth research question focused on what impact principals' learning had upon their respective schools. It became clear, however, that the use of the word "artifacts" created

some defensiveness on the part of principals as they thought about the lack of tangible evidence of their learning. Asking for “artifacts” seemed to minimize both the learning experiences of principals and the impact of that learning which was much more complicated than identifying, collecting, and observing discrete learning evidence. Hence, the validity of the data on this question lacked the strength that was intended.

Sixth, my personal biases and experiences influenced the study as well. As an experienced guidance counselor and principal, I had to resist fitting participants’ responses to my own reality. For example, as a principal talked about her discomfort in attending administrative staff meetings because she did not perceive it to be a “safe” environment for learning, it did not resonate with my experience of stepping into the challenge and finding something positive to take away from the experience. I constantly struggled to listen to what principals were sharing without using my own reality as a basis to judge the responses.

Lastly, an additional source of bias was one of familiarity as well, but it stemmed from the research participants’ assumptions about the interviewer. It seemed as if participants felt that they did not have to go into depth regarding their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, assuming that I, as a former principal, understood their point of view. Statements such as, “Oh, you know how it is,” and “You’ve been there,” seemed to stanch the flow of information in some cases. This familiarity with the participants’ challenges may have resulted in both the interviewer and participant making assumptions about how those challenges influenced principals’ perceptio

Although the limitations imposed by previous experiences, beliefs, and values of participants and researcher influenced the research, principals’ sharing appeared open and

honest. The formation of meaningful insights into the roles and learning needs of practicing school leaders was enhanced by the personal and professional relationships I was able to develop in this study. It is my hope that the findings of this study will exert a positive influence on those individuals and organizations that provide learning opportunities for school leaders and on the school leaders themselves as they examine their responsibility to fulfill their learning needs.

### Findings

The findings of this study are based on the four research questions that explored what principals indicated they needed to learn, how they learned best, what they considered to be meaningful learning, and what artifacts represented their learning. Although the questions represented discreet topics, the responses created a tapestry of interwoven feelings and perceptions.

As the five principals in this study considered the ‘what’ of their learning, they identified the need to gain information based upon the needs of the building, the school system, and state initiatives. The need to learn about technology, for example, was clearly driven from the outside in; that is, the push to learn more about technology was launched from an expectation from the state level and district level more so than from principals’ personal interest. Federal, state, and local directives regarding assessment also determined the direction of principals’ learning as they sought professional development activities beyond their schools and worked internally with their respective staffs to address the school’s needs. Three out of the five principals were immersed in building projects that absorbed much of their time as they learned about the procedures and politics of school construction. The issue of safety for staff and students emerged as a

peripheral focus as well as principals wrestled with issues created by overcrowded buildings and public demands.

It was clear from the findings that most principals took little time to learn about topics that were not specifically school-related. As one principal indicated, her learning was so focused on her work that she felt she had little to contribute to conversations that were not related to education. Another principal talked wistfully about her interest in mediation but felt so constrained by the demands of her position and her family that she felt she could not pursue her personal interests. The principals in this study were so immersed in responding to the needs of the district, school, and staff that they had little time to think purposefully about their own learning.

When the five principals were asked how they learned best, every principal highlighted the formal and informal learning that takes place with staff. They recognized the benefits learning from one another as principals and staff worked to implement federal, state, and local directives including technology and assessment. The principals acknowledged and appreciated the variety of knowledge and skills that contributed to the work, understanding that no one individual possesses all the knowledge to lead the work forward. Principals indicated that they learned best when they had the opportunity to learn with a group as they explored common interests, for each group member contributed to the learning.

The five principals also talked about the need to be supported and appreciated for their work, from either the superintendent, other principals, or staff. As principals talked about where they did and did not receive support, it seemed evident that as long as they felt supported at some level, they felt positive about their work.



In this study, principals' perceptions about meaningful learning experiences were integrated into both what they felt they needed to learn and how they learned best. All five principals mentioned that in order for learning to be meaningful, it needed to be directly related to their school needs. Principals talked about not having enough time to pursue learning opportunities that did not represent a building priority. In addition, they expressed a reluctance to leave their buildings to participate in a one or two-day workshop or conference that seldom gave them an opportunity to explore a topic in depth. On the other hand, principals rarely attended events that took them out of the building for an extended amount of time unless it took place in the summer, for remaining in the building seemed to take priority over most learning opportunities.

Principals found it difficult to identify artifacts of their learning. Initially, they expressed some discomfort with having been asked to produce tangible evidence of their learning, but as they warmed to the question, they talked about the organizational changes that had occurred while they served as principal. Only one of the five principals was able to produce tangible artifacts of her learning indicating that student test scores reflected the work that the system has accomplished regarding assessment. However, all five principals were able to identify differences in how staff worked with one another as they conducted the business of school, for they prided themselves on the positive relationships that they had helped to develop with and among staff.

The development of positive staff relationships is a topic that permeated this study, for it served as the foundation of the principals' work. This need represented a common theme as principals wove it into the conversations about how they fulfilled the responsibilities of the principalship. The development of effective relationships helped

support the learning that took place with staff, colleagues, and superintendent as they tackled, for example, technology and assessment. And since principals spent the majority of their time with staff, the development of relationships appeared to be critical to the facilitation and connection of their learning.

Lastly, each principal consistently identified the creation and maintenance of effective working relationships with staff as a priority in her work that mirrored the results of a recent study of principals throughout the state. It appeared as if each principal over time had absorbed and implemented strategies that enhanced the development of effective relationships and, hence, the work. However, it is interesting to note that only one out of the five principals purposefully sought learning opportunities that focused on the development of effective working relationships as a response to a public media event that polarized her staff. It seemed as if the connection between effective relationships and effective leadership was closely intertwined although principals rarely explored professional development in this area.

As the five principals talked about the consuming nature of their work, it appeared that professional development and educational leadership activities were explored in whatever time was left after the management details have been addressed. Principals found it difficult to prioritize the time it takes to pursue learning interests. Instead of identifying learning as a priority, the principals in this study practiced a form of reactive leadership, taking responsibility for every issue that came their way which often left little time to either identify or pursue opportunities for purposeful learning. The integration of these findings will be explored more completely in the following section as emerging themes are extracted from the data.

### Introduction to the Themes

In the following section, three major themes have been identified and explored as they relate to principals' learning. The three themes that represent challenges to the principals in this study are as follows:

- Principals accepting their work as their learning,
- Principals failure to prioritize time for reflection
- Principals remaining silent regarding the overwhelming nature of the their jobs

These three themes create a picture of the principalship that is reactive in nature and that consumes principals' time and energy. The themes reflect the demand/response nature of principals' work as they struggle to maintain the façade that they can do it all and do it well without ever stopping to examine if that is truly the case.

The first theme suggests that principals make a distinction between the learning that is embedded in the work and the learning that takes place by attending learning events beyond the school walls. Principals recognize the work that they do on a daily basis as an important source of meaningful learning as they prefer outside learning experiences that inform their work but are apologetic and defensive about not pursuing professional development opportunities beyond the school walls. This theme explores how principals might advocate for their personal and professional learning needs as they mindfully examine how those needs are embedded in their work.

The second theme reveals principals' struggle to identify artifacts that reflect their learning as they immerse themselves in meeting the needs of students, parents, and community. This struggle appeared to reveal a lack of reflection time on the part of the

principal as much as lack of evidence of tangible artifacts. It seems as if principals have surrendered themselves to completing the perceived expectations of the job without thinking about how the work aligns with their identified needs and priorities or how the work informs decisions. As a result of failing to prioritize reflection time, principals in this study have, by default, adopted the role of manager as they have tried to balance the perceived demands of the position against the time available to do the job.

The third theme explores principals' reluctance to voice their frustration with the demands of the position, perpetuating the myth that they can do it all and do it well. Although principals can articulate their concerns openly and honestly with individuals who share their plight, they have shown no evidence of being willing to share frustrations with those who might be able to look at the expectations of the principals differently and make adjustments accordingly. This reluctance to speak up for meaningful change in the principalship may help account for the reality that fewer qualified candidates are willing to lead our schools.

In total, these themes reflect principals' tendency to adopt a "leap before you look" approach to the work. Principals rarely articulated strong personal and professional convictions that they used to help frame the work. As the work progresses, the lack of framing may exacerbate the identification of the learning that is embedded in the work. Lastly, principals are doing very little to voice their concerns regarding the reactive nature of their role, preferring it seems, to remain with what they know.

#### Principals' Honoring the Learning that is Embedded in the Work

A major theme that emerged from this study was that as much as principals talked about how their daily work consumed their time, they seemed to have lost sight of how

the work represented an untapped resource for personal and professional learning.

Principals appeared to place a higher value on the learning that took place beyond the school walls than they did on the learning that was embedded in the work.

It seems that the identification of the learning that is embedded in the work requires principals' acknowledging and accepting a change in paradigms; that is, the learning that occurs by working and interacting with staff counts. Marsha came closest to accepting the work as learning when she talked about what little impact her coursework had upon her job. However, as principals talked about how they did not have time to pursue their learning needs, it reinforced the paradigm that learning is something that took place out of the building. The five principals felt defensive about not taking the time to leaving the building to learn, reinforcing this notion.

Principals appeared to be on the brink of honoring the work-embedded learning. The five principals talked frequently about the learning that had taken place as a result of the work they had done with staff as they responded to local, state, and federal expectations regarding technology and assessment. They also shared how they had worked with their staffs as they learned how to effectively implement the laptop initiative and develop meaningful local assessment protocols, for example. In addition, each principal clearly prioritized the development of effective relationships with staff. Both Marsha and Annie talked about how much they learned from staff during their daily interactions. Although Claire was the only principal that purposefully pursued learning initiatives that supported the relational work with staff, all principals talked about how much of their time was spent interacting with individuals and groups as they worked shoulder to shoulder to get the work done.

It seems incongruous that the five principals should have difficulty honoring the learning that was embedded in their work given how personal context and values often define the principal's role (Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 2000). When principals took the opportunity to attend professional development opportunities off-site, they recognized the importance of having the learning support and inform school-based needs (Marnik, 1997). Claire, Marsha, and Annie talked about gathering "nuggets" of information that could be applied immediately to the work that was happening within the school. Annie's need to have information "manageable and applicable" was shared by each principal as well. Principals, as adult learners, consistently expressed the need for their learning to have direct application to their work (Cross, 1988; Knowles, 1978; McCay, 2001; Restine, 1997) reinforcing principals' understanding that much of their learning is immersed in the responsibilities of the position.

Principals' tendency to value the learning that occurs from traditional professional development offerings (coursework, workshops, and conferences) more than work-embedded learning has several implications. Before exploring the implications, an assumption must be made that principals should be in charge for their own learning (Aitken, 1992; Allison, 1996; Robertson, 1997; Donaldson & Marnik, 1995). In this study, principals implied that this sort of learning was a luxury in which they seldom indulged. They could articulate plenty of reasons why they were unable to attend to their professional learning needs, indicating that the increased demands of the position made it difficult to justify time out of the building to pursue their identified learning needs. Continuing to consider traditional professional development opportunities as the preferred and accepted pathway to meeting learning needs lets principals "off the hook"

regarding their learning responsibilities. However, if principals could be encouraged to acknowledge a paradigm shift that values work-embedded learning, principals might discover that taking responsibility for their learning is more of a natural extension of what they do on a daily basis rather than one more thing written on their “to-do” list. To do this, principals must first give themselves permission to change how they view what it means to be, as Barth contends, the “lead learner.”

Adult learners tend to be self-directed learners (Knowles, 1978). Taking responsibility for the learning means that principals be willing to advocate for their own needs. As adult learners, principals’ have the power to drive how colleges, universities, and professional development organizations develop programs for practicing principals by embracing their work as learning and taking a stand to defend this position. That is not to say that no attempts have been made to deliver learning opportunities to meet principals’ needs; however, principals need to be clear about their needs and be willing to accept responsibility for their needs by engaging in learning opportunities that examine their practice.

#### Principals’ Struggle to Reflect Upon Their Learning

When the five principals in this study were asked to identify artifacts that represented their learning, it was clear that the question took them by surprise. They had clearly not taken the time to think about what they had learned from their work, resulting in a stance that was both defensive and apologetic as they searched for an appropriate response to the question. Betsy was the only principal who clearly connected her learning to the student assessment protocols that had been developed in her school. Marsha represented the other side of the spectrum when she intoned, “... there’s nothing.”

The struggle that principals experienced as they attempted to identify artifacts of their learning may be rooted in failing to prioritize reflection time as part of their work which research indicates is critical to the principals' role (Barth, 1995; Donaldson, 1997; Fullan, 1998). It is not surprising that principals fail to take the time to reflect upon their learning as they operate much like the little silver ball in a pinball machine, careening out of control from post to post without direction or purpose. Without exception, the principals in this study, when asked to share a typical work day, tallied a series of responses to people and events that seemed to control the way they spent their time. As indicated in the first theme, taking time to reflect seemed to be a luxury that none of the five principals felt they could afford for it would mean carving more time out of a list of responsibilities that was overwhelming to begin with.

Choosing to be immersed in a constant reactive mode leaves little time for reflection about the results of learning whether it be formal or informal. Having a sense of what has been gained or learned from daily interactions with staff had become lost in the minutia of the principals' role. Without taking the time to mindfully record and reflect upon the learning, it is difficult to identify the themes and patterns of conversations and events that might reflect their learning and inform their practice (Lambert, 1987; Marsick, 1987).

That is not to say that principals have learned nothing from their work, but the reality is that it is difficult to stop long enough to sort out what has been learned from every single action and reaction. Principals do have some sense of the learning that has taken place, as each of the principals mentioned the changes that had occurred in the ways in which business was conducted in the school as a result of their work with staff.



As Betsy indicated, it is difficult to extract specific learning, for she is a compilation of all her learning over time. The principals in this study have learned and implemented different strategies during their careers that work best for them. However, strictly speaking, these strategies seem to provide an example of each principal's leadership style rather than an artifact of their learning.

Principals' failure to prioritize reflection time has major implications that are closely tied to one another. First, the five principals' struggle to find time to reflect upon their work suggests that they may have also have difficulty in prioritizing a time to examine how their personal and professional values impact their work which is a critical component for today's school leader (Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 2000). It was a sobering revelation to think that the reactive nature of these women's leadership coupled with little or no reflection time may have resulted in principals doing the job without a clear sense of personal vision. It is important to add that each of the principals in this study identified a focus of meeting the needs of middle school students or, as Annie indicated, the "emerging adolescent." It was less clear what that focus meant in terms of principals' unshakeable convictions.

Second, and most distressing, is that as principals have accepted the responsibility of addressing each need as it comes, they seem to have succumbed to the parts of the position that call for management, neglecting to reflect upon maintaining the balance between the managing, the learning, and the leading. Principals seem to have adopted the role of manager as their primary responsibility, for they can easily recount how they have spent their days yet cannot articulate what they have learned. The myriad responsibilities of the role have forced their hand; they have learned to manage the demands of the

position in order to survive the position, it seems.

### Acknowledging the Challenges of the Principal's Role

During my ten years as a principal, I could count on leaving the weekly administrative team meetings with more things to do than when I walked in the door. Not once did I indicate that I could not possibly do one more thing and that I was, as Claire stated, "staggering under the burden." The same seems to be true of the principals in this study, for although principals expressed the need to be supported for what they do, no one talked about feeling unable to handle everything that came their way. Principals' concerns were aligned with the concerns expressed in research conducted by Allison (1996), Goddard (1997), and Walker, Mitchel & Turner (1999), which revealed the struggle of balancing the roles of manager, leader, and learner.

However, frustration bubbled up as principals shared their stories. Claire talked about her lack of reflection time as she "hit the deck running" when returning from a workshop. Marsha referred to her work as a principal as a "snippet job," wondering if she was really a "snippet person" who was attracted to the reactive nature of her work. Betsy talked about constantly being in a "crisis mode" as she handled everything that came her way. Sophie clearly saw her role as meeting the needs of others, saving her professional development for summer, while Annie deflected questions about her own learning needs by focusing on the needs of her students instead. Accepting this reactive mode of doing business suggests that principals are either comfortable in this role despite their frustrations or they are reluctant to share their concerns.

As , (2000) indicated, being willing to talk openly about the frustrations of balancing the roles of manager, leader, and learner is no easy task. Principals' reluctance

to talk purposefully about how to do the work differently has strong implications. First, although principals expressed their frustrations with the nature of their roles during the three interviews, they never indicated that they had shared their frustrations with others, perhaps not being able to risk being perceived as someone who was unable or unwilling to handle the demands of the position. Their reluctance to articulate their concerns may stem from, as Sophie indicated, the lack of a safe environment where such conversations are honored and encouraged. Although four out of the five principals talked about the need to be valued and supported in their work, no one talked about using these groups as a sounding board for their frustrations. It appears that being supported by others for doing a good job does not necessarily mean that an environment exists that is safe enough to share frustrations and concerns.

Second, principals appear powerless to break the demand/response cycle in which they have found themselves. Principals seem to be placing their energies into surviving the demands rather than having conversations about how to address the demands in a different way. The implication of what principals' continued silence means to the future of the principalship is disturbing. It is becoming more and more difficult to find good principals for Maine's schools. Fewer and fewer individuals are willing to accept the demands of the position (Donaldson, Buckingham, Coladarci, 2003) as it is currently configured. At the same time, more and more demands are being heaped at the principals' doorstep. However, the urgency to change has not been strong enough or consistent enough to systemically address the overwhelming demands of the position.

## Recommendations

The research data reveals a pattern of interwoven themes that are linked by principals' reactive response to the demands that are placed upon them. It is a challenge to break the existing cycle that reveals principals being too busy responding to needs to reflect upon their work, accepting that the nature of the position as it has evolved over time is the way it needs to be. There is no evidence in this study that principals have tried to address their learning needs with superintendents or with other colleagues. In addition, principals spend little time developing networks that support them in their learning or their leadership. Principals have remained silent about a position that they find overwhelming; they can only continue to do the job in the only way that they know how which is to continue to respond to the constant demands of the job rather than taking care of their needs regarding learning and leading. The perpetuation of this cycle guarantees that the principal's position will not change unless principals are more mindful about their needs.

Although the power to break the cycle lies in the hands of the principals, they have demonstrated a reluctance to share their concerns with individuals or groups who might have the power to make changes. This suggests that principals would benefit from superintendents acknowledging and supporting principals' need to conduct open and honest conversations about their concerns. The good news is that there is evidence that some movement has taken place where principals have either advocated for themselves or been given the opportunity to articulate their needs:

- The superintendent of one local district has devoted a portion of administrative team meetings to the development of Critical Friends groups

where principals talk about the challenges of their work with their colleagues.

- In a much smaller district, a principal approached the school board with his concerns, indicating that he could not continue to do the kind of job he wanted to do unless some responsibilities were removed from his plate.
- Research groups have demonstrated principals' concerns regarding their positions.
- Initiatives such as the Maine Principals' Academy and the Maine School Leadership Network have developed networks that provide school leaders learning opportunities that are connected to their work.

There is no question that change takes time and creating a culture that encourages principals to look at their roles in a critical light requires more than a quick fix. The following recommendations recount steps that superintendents and school boards might consider:

- Superintendents can support learning environments for principals as they develop protocols that encourage principals to identify their values, reflect upon their work, and create plans based on this work.
- Superintendents and principals can accept the responsibility of keeping school boards fully informed regarding the increased demands of the principals' role.
- School districts can broaden their perception of leadership by providing opportunities for teachers to assume more leadership roles.
- Superintendents can be instrumental in creating this culture by developing partnerships with colleges and universities that allow for university faculty to offer courses on site that are aligned to principals' expressed learning needs.

- Recertification teams at the district level might consider creating guidelines for principal recertification that include the expectation that principals reflect upon their practice with other principals and develop plan that build upon their identified needs..

The support of collaborative, meaningful learning initiatives for principals can convey a clear message that superintendents and school boards value their work and understand the need to find new and different ways to manage the challenges of the position.

In addition, organizations which provide professional development opportunities for principals such as the Maine Principals' Association could reinforce the need for systemic change by offering ongoing workshops that encourage and support principals as they advocate for their own needs. As principals should be mindful and purposeful about their learning, so should those individuals, groups, and organizations that provide the learning. Promoting collaborative, reflective learning opportunities that can be tied to the real work of principals in a meaningful way is crucial to the support of schools and school leadership.

Creating mandates, protocols, and opportunities for principals' learning represent relatively easy solutions to a complicated problem. Setting an expectation that principals are expected to identify and work on their challenges in a meaningful way extends far beyond mandates and protocols, as it requires the development of a culture where it is acceptable to talk about and address what is not working. As it is, the overwhelming demands of the principal is like having an elephant in the living room; people are so accustomed to it being there that it becomes nearly invisible as they find ways to work

around it. Principals need to acknowledge their struggles and frustrations in safe environment that fosters support and collaboration.

Fewer and fewer individuals are seeking to be principals. If we are to continue to provide quality education to Maine students, we need to do more than acknowledge the consuming nature of the principal's position; we must work tirelessly to provide opportunities for principals to examine their practice in a realistic, meaningful manner. We must do it in a way that informs leadership rather than becoming one more thing on the list of things that principals need to accomplish as they do their jobs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Principal's Questionnaire

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

Name of School: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following:

Universities/colleges Attended	Degrees Held	Year ReceivedMajor
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

List courses, professional development activities, in-service activities, etc. that you have attended during the last year:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Grades in school: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of students served: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of teachers: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Support Staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Socioeconomic level of the majority of students: \_\_\_\_\_

Percentage of students who have Free Lunch: \_\_\_\_\_

Year that school was built: \_\_\_\_\_

Condition of building (circle one): Excellent Good Fair Poor

Thank you for completing this form. I will collect it at our next meeting. I appreciate your support in this project!

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol #1

## Interview Protocol #1

Introduction: Thank you for being willing to engage in this research project. As I indicated in my letter, the purpose of this research is to learn how you as the building principal perceive your own learning needs and how the pursuit of those identified needs affects your school.

1. As part of my understanding about your school setting, what are the three features of your school which come to your mind?
2. What has it been like for you being the principal of this school? What have been some of the rewards? Some of the challenges?
3. Please walk me through a typical day for you. What time do you arrive? To whom do you connect? What kinds of routines, if any, do you try to complete each day? What does the end of the day look like for you? What time do you usually return home? What kinds of school responsibilities engage your time at home if any?
4. What are the specific challenges are you facing as principal of this building? Talk about a challenge that you've faced either in the past or recently. How have you tried to address it? How has that worked out? What resources did you use to solve the problem?
5. Brainstorm for a minute a list of things about which you would like to learn? Talk to me about why you chose the topics on this list (identify individually). How do you learn about these topics?



6. On what other basis do you determine what you need to learn? What other personal/professional learning would you identify as areas about which you would like to learn? Why?
7. May I have a copy of your student handbook, policy handbook and mission and vision statements? Are there additional publications that might help me develop a stronger sense of your school?
8. Is there anything you would like to add to today's conversation? Is there anything that I've missed that it's important that you share with me?

## Appendix C: Interview Protocol #2

## Interview Protocol #2

1. What would you say are the three biggest things that you've learned while serving in this position?
2. What conditions need to exist to maximize your learning? What characteristics does a learning experience need to have to make it meaningful to you? What kind of learning experiences do you most enjoy? What kind of learning experiences do you find the most helpful? The least helpful? Why?
3. Talk to me about your most recent learning experience(s). What made you choose to learn about this topic? Was this topic of professional interest, personal interest or both?
4. What building initiatives absorb your time and energy? What system initiatives, if any, absorb your time and energy? How have these building and/or system initiatives influenced your perceptions regarding what you need to learn? What artifacts exist that represent these initiatives?
5. Have you engaged in learning experiences that were not connected to specific initiatives? Please describe them. Why did you choose them?
6. Which learning experiences did you find to be the most valuable? Why?
7. What learning experiences did you find to be the least valuable? Why?
8. Is there anything about your learning or your learning experiences that you'd like to add? Is there anything that I've missed that you'd like to share with me?

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol #3

## Interview Protocol #3

What have you gained as a result of your learning?

1. How are you able to use the information in your school setting?
2. Please talk about what how you have been able to use what you've learned in your work. What made it possible for you to use your learning in your school setting? What learning have you not been able to use? Why?
3. What is it that makes it possible for some learning to come to fruition for you and not others?
4. What evidences exist that show how a learning experience has had an impact on your school and not just you?
5. If you could design an ideal system for your own professional learning, what would it look like?
6. Is there anything about you, your learning, or your learning experiences that you'd like to add? Is there anything that I've missed that you'd like to share with me? Would you be interested in receiving a synopsis of my dissertation?

Thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of this research. I appreciate your willingness to share your valuable time with me.

## Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

## University Research: Informed Consent

May 2002

Dear Colleague,

The purpose of this letter is to thank you for your interest in the research project “*Through Maine Leaders’ Eyes: Interviews with Five Women Principals Regarding Their Learning.*” First, allow me to recap our recent telephone conversation about this project. As I indicated during our conversation, my name is Anita Campbell and I am enrolled as a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine, Orono. For my doctoral dissertation, I have chosen to interview five Maine middle school principals to develop a sense of how they continue to be active learners given the increased complexity of the position.

Allow me to review with you the process and expectations of this research.

Should you choose to take part in this research, you will participate in three interviews that will be arranged at times that are convenient to you, lasting from approximately 45 minutes to one hour. I will be using two tape recorders to record the interviews; should one machine malfunction, I have a back-up record of the interview. Some sample questions of the interview include:

- Please walk me through a typical day for you. What time do you arrive? To whom do you connect? What kinds of routines, if any, do you try to complete each day? What does the end of the day look like for you? What time do you usually return home? What kinds of school responsibilities engage your time at home, if any?

- On what basis do you determine what you need to learn? What other personal/professional learning would you identify as areas about which you would like to learn? Why?
- Talk to me about your most recent learning experience(s)? What made you choose to learn about this topic? Was this topic of professional interest, personal interest or both?
- Please talk about how you have been able to use what you've learned in your work. What made it possible for you to use your learning in your school setting? What learning have you not been able to use? Why?

In order to ensure confidentiality and privacy, your identity and the identity of your school/district will be known only to me; no identifiers will be attached to any materials that are contained in the dissertation, including the recorded interviews which will be transcribed by a third party. Pseudonyms will be used in place of names. The tapes of the recorded interviews will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home to which only I have access. I will keep the tapes for three years, after which time they will be destroyed. The information that you share is voluntary and you will be able to be selective about what you share with me and to what questions you choose to respond. The research questions that I will be asking about your daily professional activities do not exceed those commonly shared in professional discussion about your daily leadership work and the successes and challenges that you experience as a principal. If any question is asked that you would choose not to answer, it is your right to pass on that (or any other) question.

The benefits of this project will be to discover how school principals balance new learning with the intricacies of the position. This information may serve to inform those individuals and institutions whose responsibility it is to provide that learning. Should you have any additional questions or concerns about this project and/or participation, please don't hesitate to contact me at 926-5613 ([acamp@megalink.net](mailto:acamp@megalink.net)) and/or my advisor Dr. Gordon Donaldson at [gordon.donaldson@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gordon.donaldson@umit.maine.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 581-1498 ([gayle.anderson@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gayle.anderson@umit.maine.edu)).

I appreciate your willingness to engage in this research with me. I'm looking forward to making these connections with you!

Sincerely,

Anita M. Campbell

Doctoral Student in Educational Leadership

University of Maine, Orono

## Consent to Take Part in Study

I consent to take part in the study initiated by Anita Campbell entitled “Through Maine Leaders’ Eyes: Interviews with Five Women Principals Regarding Their Learning.” She has explained to me that this project is a part of her doctoral work in Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. I understand that the purpose of the study is to gather information about how principals view their learning.

I understand the conditions of this research project and willingly volunteer my participation. I also understand that I may willingly withdraw from this project at any time.

I understand that this research will be published by the researcher and the University of Maine, and that every precaution will be taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality. If I have any questions regarding this study or about my consent and what it entails, I may call Anita Campbell at (207)926-5613 or Gordon Donaldson at (207)581-2450.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Appendix F: Human Subjects Form

University of Maine

## Application of Approval of Research with Human Subjects

Title of Project:

Through Maine Leaders' Eyes: Interviews with Five Women Principals  
Regarding their Learning

- Summary of the Proposal

The purpose of this research project is to examine how Maine principals identify and pursue their learning needs given the complexity of the position and the current climate of demanding expectations. The goal of the research is to understand more fully what and how principals learn in ways that are meaningful to the performance of their responsibilities as leaders and how to provide meaningful learning opportunities for school principals who must constantly juggle the roles of manager and educational leader.

This project involves interviewing five Maine women who currently hold the position of principal in schools that serve middle school age students. Research participants will be interviewed on three separate occasions beginning in July of 2002 and ending in February 2003 using interview protocols that are consistent with the purpose of the research (see attached).

- Personal



I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership. I will be solely responsible for collecting the data. I will receive clerical assistance in transcribing the interviews, but I will be the only person who knows the identities of the principals and their respective schools.

- **Subject Recruitment**

The subjects of the study are five women who are currently employed as full time principals in schools serving middle school age students. The sample will be selected from 16 school principals that work within a reasonable geographic distance from my home and whose schools meet the criteria stated above.

I will write a letter to the principals of these 16 schools outlining the purpose and process of the project, asking if they might be interested in being a participant in this research. If more than five women express an interest, I will ask my committee chair to randomly select five names from the list. I will inform principals that their participation is completely voluntary and confidential (see attached letter).

- **Confidentiality**

In order to ensure confidentiality and privacy, the identity of the research participant and her school/district will not be attached to any material or publications. Each interview will be tape-recorded to ensure accuracy, but any data that contains any information regarding challenges that the research participant faces in her school/district and/or confidential student information will be deleted from the study. Pseudonyms will be used for the research participant and her school to protect all data that is collected during taped interviews or in my note-taking. Upon completion of the study, written documents will be destroyed.

- Risk to Subjects

The research questions inquire into daily professional activities commonly experienced by educational leaders; the information shared is voluntary and selective. Risks are minimal and do not exceed those commonly encountered in professional discussion about the research participant's daily leadership challenges. The research participant is encouraged not to use the names of staff, students, or personnel. However, any sensitive information will be dealt with in a non-specific manner; if the information is deemed to be personally damaging to anyone, it will be excluded from the study. Personally or professionally damaging information includes information that may pose a threat to the research participant's position, reputation, personal standing at her setting, or personal well-being.

- Benefits

The study will analyze the commonalities among the expressed needs of the principals, the pursuit of those needs, and the implementation of the resultant learning. These findings can assist those individuals and institutions that have the responsibility for providing learning opportunities for Maine principals, enhancing the development of offerings that represent a good match to the learner. The study will be relevant to the larger educational community as theorists and researchers try to more fully understand the needs of adult learners who serve our schools. A copy of the completed research will be available to each participant.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Anita M. Campbell was born in Brunswick, Maine, on February 26, 1947. She was raised in Freeport, Maine, and graduated from Freeport High School in 1965. She attended the University of Maine at Presque Isle, graduating in 1969 with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She attended the University of Southern Maine, graduating in 1983 with a Master's degree in Counselor Education. She entered the Educational Leadership graduate program at the University of Maine at Orono, in the fall of 1998.

Currently, Anita is spearheading the University of Maine at Farmington's Alternative Certification Initiative. Anita is a candidate for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine in December, 2003.