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Zoom: The Changing Nature of Middle School Shared Instructional Leadership on the Way to the Common Core

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ZOOM: THE CHANGING NATURE
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL SHARED INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP
ON THE WAY TO THE COMMON CORE

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Reading and Language Doctoral Program

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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... vi
List of Tables ................................................................................................................................... vii
Chapter One ....................................................................................................................................... 1
   Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1
   Rationale for the Study ............................................................................................................... 2
   Guiding Questions ..................................................................................................................... 8
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature ............................................................................................... 11
   School Leadership through Time ............................................................................................... 11
   Instructional Leadership Defined ............................................................................................... 14
   Characteristics and Actions of the Effective Instructional Leader in Literacy .................. 20
      Develop and implement a schoolwide literacy action plan ............................................... 21
      Support teachers to improve instruction .......................................................................... 22
      Use data to make decisions about literacy teaching and learning .................................. 24
      Build leadership capacity ..................................................................................................... 25
      Allocate resources to support literacy ................................................................................. 25
   The Literacy Coach’s Contribution to Instructional Leadership ........................................ 27
   Common Core State Standards ................................................................................................. 33
   Building a Learning Community Based on Systems Thinking ............................................ 41
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 45
Chapter Three: Methodology ........................................................................................................... 47
   Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 47
   Research Questions .................................................................................................................... 50
   The Big Picture: Using Ethnography to Answer Burning Questions ..................................... 50
   Zoom In on Participants ............................................................................................................. 52
   Zoom Out to Collection Plan: The Stories of the Participants ............................................. 54
      Interviews for administrators ............................................................................................... 60
Focus groups for literacy coaches .......................................................... 60
Additional data to contribute to the big picture .................................. 61
Zoom Out Even Further for Data Analysis: The Bigger Picture .............. 62
Chapter Four: Findings ........................................................................ 67
Introduction ......................................................................................... 67
The Common Core Rollout in Lakeside School District ....................... 69
Fall ......................................................................................................... 72
Winter ................................................................................................... 78
Spring .................................................................................................... 85
Zoom In on the Results of the Interviews .............................................. 89
The results of the district administration interviews ............................ 92
   Instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges .................... 92
   Sharing leadership with literacy coaches ........................................... 98
   Common Core rollout and a new understanding of literacy instruction .. 102
The results of the building administrator interviews ............................ 108
   Instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges .................... 109
   Sharing leadership with literacy coaches ........................................... 119
   Common Core rollout and a new understanding of literacy instruction .. 122
The results of the literacy coach interviews ....................................... 127
   Instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges .................... 127
   Sharing leadership with administrators ............................................. 135
   Common Core rollout and a new understanding of literacy instruction .. 140
Zoom In on Common Themes across the Interviews ............................ 144
Time ...................................................................................................... 145
Trust ..................................................................................................... 147
The need for consistency across the district ....................................... 150
Middle school’s peculiar issues ......................................................... 153
Conclusion ......................................................................................... 154
Chapter Five: Summary of Findings and Discussion ...........................................155

Zoom In on the Conceptual Framework ............................................................156

Zoom In on Answers to Research Questions ..................................................175

Implications: What Does This All Mean? ......................................................196

Recommendations .............................................................................................203

Limitations ........................................................................................................214

Further Research ............................................................................................216

Zoom In on Year Two: One Year Later ............................................................218

Conclusion .......................................................................................................223

References ........................................................................................................226

Appendices ......................................................................................................242

Appendix A: Literacy Coach Focus Group Questions ........................................242

Appendix B: Building Administrator Interview Questions ................................244

Appendix C: District Administrator Interview Questions ..................................246

Appendix D: Example of Data Analysis Notes ..................................................248

Appendix E: Literacy Leadership Actions/Characteristics Research Framework...249

Appendix F: Content of the CCSS Presentations ..............................................251

Appendix G: (Sample) Interview Transcript Excerpt .......................................253
Abstract

The complexities, diversity, and nuances of schools today require the shared leadership of the best and brightest that education has to offer. All across the country, school districts are embarking on the challenging journey toward higher and better standards and performance found in the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. This dissertation describes the early CCSS implementation efforts of the middle schools in a Midwest suburban district. In particular, it examines the instructional leadership that was shared among the administrators and literacy coaches who led the adoption and implementation of the new Standards. The research was conducted during their first year of the CCSS implementation plan and was based on a year-long series of interviews with district level administrators, building level administrators, and the three middle school coaches who all shared responsibility for developing and executing the plan. The author of the study was a middle school coach at the time and describes the positive and negative impact of being a participant-researcher. The findings support the extant research that illustrates the complexities of instructional leadership: while all the participants had a good understanding of their own instructional leadership responsibilities, their enactment of these was carried out in varying degrees due to the culture of the district, their confidence in the subject matter, as well as the time that the participants were able to commit to the new learning required by the Common Core State Standards.
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In my life, and particularly in this doctoral journey, I am grateful to have been blessed with...

...colleagues and friends – can’t separate one from the other! I have learned more about literacy leadership from my work and friendship with you than could be contained in all the books in a major university library:

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List of Tables

TABLE 1: Demographic Data for the Schools in This Study 53
TABLE 2: Research Study Participants 55-57
TABLE 3: Interview Windows 59
TABLE 4: Interview Schedule 59
Zoom: The Changing Nature

of Middle School Shared Instructional Leadership

on the Way to the Common Core

There is a delightful wordless picture book for children titled *Zoom*, written by Istvan Banyai, that begins with a close up of a rooster’s comb and then slowly zooms out, page by page, increasing the reader’s vision until the final image. At that point, we can see the entire universe, and we come to understand the big picture by slowly widening our lens. This brings back memories of those photos in children’s magazines which show a tiny piece of something and challenge you to guess what the whole might be. These attempts to understand the whole by examining a part can be compared to my quest to better understand the literacy culture of a suburban Midwest school district where I taught for 16 years.

At the time of this study, the school district served over 8,200 students from preschool through grade 8 in twelve buildings with one district administration center. The literacy team at the district level consisted of an assistant superintendent of curriculum, two language arts curriculum specialists, a Reading Recovery teacher leader/intervention specialist, a director of special education with three assistant directors, a bilingual programs director, and a team of literacy coaches. All three middle schools had a principal and two assistants; the nine elementary schools each had a principal and one assistant principal (except for two schools who shared one assistant). Beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, every building had a literacy coach, either full or half time, depending on building needs. My position at the time of this study was as a full time literacy coach in one of the middle schools, although I have since moved out of state and now work as a literacy coach in an urban high school in the Southeast.
When I began my journey with this district in the mid-1990s as an elementary special education teacher, my primary perspective of the literacy leadership culture of our district was focused on the building level. For the first few years, my lens was tightly focused on my responsibilities of teaching reading and writing to fourth and fifth grade special education students. As I began to participate in district-wide curriculum committee work and to eventually teach district classes in literacy instruction for teachers, my lens widened to a broader understanding of the culture beyond my classroom and my building; it was then that I began to notice the differences among buildings’ literacy instruction despite the district’s efforts to ensure parity and alignment. Once I became a middle school literacy coach, I was privy to meetings, discussions, and decisions that affected the literacy instruction of all district students and teachers, which further broadened my perspective. My view of this district literacy culture toggled back and forth between my own building (like the rooster’s comb) and the district level where state and federal mandates were changing the way we provided instruction (similar to the view of the universe in Banyai’s book, *Zoom*) in the state’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

**Rationale for the Study**

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed into law by President George Bush in 2002 has become known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. This law was designed to improve education for all students in the United States by holding school districts accountable for measurable growth in high stakes academic testing. Experts agree that this law and the current political context have changed the way that schools provide instruction in order to meet the new assessment requirements (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hallinger, 2005; Mraz, Algonzzine & Watson, 2008;
Schmoker, 2006). In addition, the Common Core State Standards were recently adopted by the state with the purpose of improving our curriculum to better prepare students for the rigor of college expectations (Common Core State Standards Initiatives, 2015b). These many changes require a new depth of leadership and literacy knowledge from district administrators, building administrators, as well as teachers and other support staff who are responsible for the education of students within a school or district. Today’s schools require instructional leaders who are ready to address the increasing complexities involved in preparing our current students for the 21st century and meeting the demands for accountability in this high stakes testing culture.

In my own corner of the universe, I witnessed changes in the involvement and understanding of administrators and teachers on many different levels as we strove to create a model of instruction that would raise student reading and writing to the levels now required in Common Core Standards along with the high stakes testing demands. My own building administrators expressed feelings that ranged from being overwhelmed by it all to being energized by a clear focus that will align instruction in all schools. The latter is an interesting reaction given that the most recent State Learning Standards for Language Arts have been firmly in place since being adopted in 1997 (http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils); however, in over sixteen years with the school district, I rarely heard these standards discussed by building administrators or teachers. While I believe that the state standards have informed decisions at the district curriculum department level, that information did not seem to be regularly translated to or internalized by teachers and building administrators.

This leads to the question of what literacy instruction looks like in this district and how it has changed over time. Historically, this district used basal series for reading instruction until adopting a whole language model in the early nineties. This was followed by a change to the
reading/writing workshop model of instruction in the late 1990’s; this adoption was accompanied by book studies and professional development, but the actual instructional plan was left to the judgment of teachers and teams at the building level and was based on the needs of the students (personal communication – retired assistant superintendent of curriculum). Following the successful implementation of Reading Recovery services in all elementary buildings, the district moved to adopt the Comprehensive Literacy Model (CLM) approximately ten years prior to this research study. This system is based on the work of Linda Dorn at the University of Arkansas and provided further support and professional development for the reading/writing workshop model. Hiring literacy coaches for every school in the district for the 2009-2010 school year was a direct result of the progressive adoption of the ten features of the Comprehensive Literacy Model. Literacy instruction was guided by the District Reading and Writing Instructional Continuums (Writing, June 2003; Reading, Revised March 2005) that were based on the state standards’ model of broad developmental stages of literacy learning (pre-emergent, emergent, early, transitional, fluent, and proficient) to provide a framework and guidelines for instruction. Thus, teachers and administrators were provided with a bridge to the state standards but were not required to familiarize themselves with the actual standards themselves unless they chose to do this on their own.

One of the early jobs of the new team of literacy coaches was to develop a grade-level specific framework of literacy skills to better align instruction. When the state adopted the Common Core State Standards on June 24, 2010, teachers and literacy coaches were in the process of drafting Essential Reading and Writing Skills for each grade level based on the 1997 State Standards and the district Reading/Writing Continuums as well as the proposed Common Core State Standards; this was done under the direction of the district curriculum office. After
the state’s adoption of CCSS, it was agreed that this process would be abandoned in favor of direct adoption of the new standards. During the school years of 2010-2011 and 2011-2012, district curriculum administrators and literacy coaches embarked on their own research and professional development to learn more about the Common Core State Standards. This provided the background knowledge for the creation of a district plan for adopting these standards beginning in the 2012-2013 school year. In addition to their own study, literacy coaches and district curriculum representatives attended seminars and consulted with representatives of the Regional Office of Education and the State Board of Education who were working with districts on the adoption of the CCSS.

This period of learning and planning was one of transition as key players realized the import of the new College and Career Ready Standards and prepared for adoption. District administrators who previously created their own language arts curriculum were now willing to consider outside experts and program materials to supplement this curriculum. Building administrators who once concerned themselves primarily with administrative and disciplinary issues were now making a concerted effort to understand the reading and writing process and support teachers in their literacy instruction. Middle school teachers who once were considered disciplinary subject area specialists were now being expected to collaborate on how to teach reading and writing across the curriculum. More than ever, the middle layer of literacy support that had been cultivated in the hiring of literacy coaches with instructional expertise was expected to bridge the gap between administration and teachers; this middle layer bolstered the foundation needed to change the face of the instructional management in the district to a stronger version of shared instructional leadership by providing knowledgeable assistance at the building level. For example, coaches began attending conferences on subjects related to Common Core,
conducting coach book studies on developing literacy across the curriculum, discussing these issues at building and district PLC meetings, and offering optional courses to teachers who were interested in pursuing more information on their own.

However, let’s be clear that during this early phase, all of this preparation to adopt Common Core Standards was very loosely organized and primarily carried out at the building level. There was little to no coordination of efforts by the district until 2012-13 when the district rollout of the Common Core Standards took place. Until the district administrators announced that they would take responsibility for all Common Core professional development, there was a wide variation among buildings in their preparation for what was to come. Some buildings were doing nothing while others began the process of unpacking the standards and planning Common Core lessons due to the interest and individual efforts of building administrators and literacy coaches. Once the district began to develop its own plan for implementation of the Standards, schools were asked to put their individual work on hold in order to coordinate efforts. Picture, if you will, the lens zooming in to a building where teachers were arming themselves with knowledge about the Common Core State Standards and beginning to adapt and plan instruction to meet them and then widening to an entire district where there was little to no direction for the other schools at that time. It wasn’t until the summer of 2012 when the district began to create a plan for CCSS rollout and professional development for teachers.

Let’s add another layer to my personal view of this school district. Even before I was hired as a teacher, I had the privilege of being a parent member of the district’s Learning Leadership Team which acted as a think tank and advisory board for the superintendent and curriculum leadership. After I began to work for the district, I continued to serve on this committee as a teacher representative for two different superintendents until this LLT was
disbanded under our most recent superintendent, Dr. Vargas. It was in this capacity that I first learned the importance of Systems Thinking as defined by Peter Senge, and the necessity for every member of the organization to commit to the learning needed to achieve a Shared Vision.

Later, in my own doctoral studies, I was reintroduced to this theory in my course in Instruction and Staff Development taught by Donna Ogle at National Louis University. Through my study of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Learning Organizations* (Senge, 2006) and our class discussions, I began to better understand how Systems Thinking could form a foundation for meeting the challenges of growing diversity and increasing federal and state mandates in our schools. The need for and lack of Systems Thinking in my own school district appeared to affect our ability to coordinate our efforts and make significant, continual, and sustained improvement in student achievement. Senge’s work began to influence my own thinking and practice as I became one of the first literacy coaches in the school district and took on a position of broader influence on the literacy instruction of thousands of students. As you will see, Systems Thinking formed the theoretical foundation of my research and my plan to better understand and support our school district in these difficult times for education.

While recognizing that changes such as these are happening all over the country, I believe the study of this microcosm of an educational system has value that can be transferred to other learning organizations. Each school district has unique circumstances and needs, but in addition, we all share many of the same struggles as well as the same purpose of preparing all our students to be successful global citizens. Now, more than ever, we have been given, in the Common Core State Standards, even more congruent goals, paths, and direction to achieve this objective. As in most areas of the country, the adoption of these Standards is a work in progress, and we face a challenging and exciting future. Our challenges reflect those of other school
districts, many who face even more serious ones than our own, as we consider changes to instruction, curriculum, professional development, and assessment in order to align with these new standards. The tension and excitement we feel is reflected across the United States, and this future is being created and written as we speak. Because the common standards initiative is so new, this inquiry is at the forefront of documenting how one school district is aligning instruction and curriculum to that final end.

**Guiding Questions**

For the purpose of this dissertation, my goal is to document the change in middle school instructional leadership in literacy in this school district during the 2012-2013 school year when the Common Core State Standards were introduced. Questions guiding this study are:

1) How do middle school building administrators and literacy coaches understand and enact their own shared instructional leadership responsibilities in the process of implementing Common Core State Standards?

2) How has the introduction of literacy coaches contributed to the overall instructional leadership of these building administrators?

3) How has the district’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards influenced administrators’ and literacy coaches’ understanding of reading and writing instruction?

This ethnographic study focuses on how the shared instructional leadership of district- and building-level administrators and the literacy coaches was enacted and understood during the adoption of the Common Core Standards in three middle schools of a Midwest suburban school district. It is my honor and my challenge to represent the experiences and feelings of the key players who shared this journey with me by relaying the stories of their learning, their challenges and their hopes. Speaking in the first person, I describe my own personal thoughts and
experiences on this journey at the micro-level of this learning organization. This process required deep reflection and analysis to create a synthesis of such diverse data as Denzin and Lincoln explain (2008):

Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories about what they have done and why.

No single method can grasp all the subtle variations in ongoing human experience. (p. 29)

As anyone in education today knows, neither the field nor this inquiry is a job for the faint-of-heart. The instructional leaders of today’s schools are faced with a plethora of challenges including the changing demographics of society and our students, economic stress and resulting rising poverty levels, dwindling school funding, governmental mandates including high stakes testing, pressures from the media and society as a whole, and a critical need to better prepare our students for the global and digital society into which they will graduate. It is my fervent hope and belief that the story of our district’s successes and struggles will contribute to the larger story that is being written by educators all over the United States as we learn to widen our vision to create communities of learning who will embrace the Common Core State Standards as a vehicle for improving instruction for all students. This initiative promises to bring wave upon wave of change both small and monumental in the ways in which we prepare our students for college and career readiness. This study explicates just some of the early changes that will be rocking our world of education for years to come.

After all, ethnography is, by its very nature, “highly particular and hauntingly personal, yet it serves as the basis for grand comparison and understanding within and across a society” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. ix). I invite you to listen to private and public voices as we zoom back
and forth between the national community that the Common Core State Standards has created, the local community of this school district, and the personal experiences and feelings of those of us who live this life with mind, heart, body, and soul.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

In order to launch an investigation of instructional leadership in Lakeside\(^1\), it is important to form a foundation of understanding of the contributing issues. A good place to begin will be to investigate the concept of how school leadership has been defined and has changed over time. Next, I will examine the varied interpretations of instructional leadership, what the research has to say about shared leadership, and which characteristics of an instructional leader are considered most effective in the research literature, particularly in the field of adolescent literacy. After this review of instructional leadership, I will outline the relatively new field of research surrounding the contributions of literacy coaches to school instructional leadership culture. Finally, I will summarize what the literature suggests in terms of the contributions of the Common Core State Standards and Senge’s Systems Thinking framework to address the current problems with instructional leadership.

School Leadership through Time

The unchanging, dependable nature of education has been described as the “grammar” of schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). This is similar to the rules of the grammar of a language: it has cemented its place as a foundational part of linguistics. Regardless of the winds of change, the basic system remains the same and resists challenges and reform attempts. School leadership remains a foundational part of the grammar of schooling. The members of this leadership team must focus on building an instructional core that will advance and sustain high student performance across a school and a district. This is done by creating leadership coherence according to the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

\(^1\) Pseudonym
(Childress, Elmore, Grossman & Johnson, 2007). Educational coherence is defined as the integration of all parts of the school system so that common goals may be pursued and achieved; in order to build this type of coherence, consistency of leadership is needed at both the district and building levels so that the work of all of the stakeholders is aligned to the goal of building and supporting the instructional core of literacy instruction both within language arts classrooms and across all content areas, which will lead to improved student achievement.

For many years, schools in America have been led by headmasters and principals whose major responsibility has been to see that the school is running smoothly by all outside standards of order and control, providing stability and structure with occasional spiritual guidance for teachers (Kafka, 2009). Andy Hargreaves (2000) calls the early period of professional learning in Anglophone education from the early 1800s until the mid-1900s the Age of the Pre-professional; both teaching and leadership positions were earned and learned by the apprenticeship method with little or no formal training required. The overall school culture was one of isolation, conservatism, individualism, and non-interference with little need for teacher leadership under the strict hierarchical structure (Little, 2003; Lortie, 1975).

In the economic boom following the end of World War II, there were increasing calls for accountability and scrutiny of schools as we prepared our children for the space race and the modern industrialized future. During the war years, schools had become places for the community to rally and support the war effort which contributed to the principal’s responsibilities as a community leader in addition to those within the school (Kafka, 2009). Although the school culture retained its autonomy and preference for isolation, teachers were required to be better trained and more closely evaluated. Thus, this Age of the Autonomous Professional (Hargreaves, 2000) also required administrators who were skilled at managing the
professional development of their teachers and focused more on leadership than on student
achievement (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003; York-Barr & Duke,
2004).

Hargreaves attributes the next period of professional learning in education to a reaction to
the “increased complexities” of education growing since the 1960’s (2000, p. 162) that saw
increasing diversity in the classroom and included the integration of special education students;
he calls this the Age of the Collegial Professional. This phase coincides with one of Little’s
(2003) policy changes: “a wave of whole-school reform initiatives supported by both public
agencies and private foundations” (p. 407) in response to increasing criticism of education. By
now, all teachers and administrators were required to have college degrees and the requirements
for teacher certification were being developed and strengthened. During this time, school
administrators were still primarily concerned with supervision and evaluation of school
personnel, determining and meeting the needs of the building, and planning for school
improvement (Gottfredson & Hybl, 1987; Kafka, 2009). However, the political pressures to
improve student achievement increased the need for professional development, and this created
new instructional responsibilities for building leaders since the culture was leaning toward more
teamwork and shared learning in order to achieve these goals (Cuban, 1988; Hargreaves, 2000).

The aforementioned Age of the Collegial Professional overlaps with current times which
may be referred to as The Age of the Post-Professional or the Postmodern-Professional, a period
that is being written as we are living it; only time will tell if the field of education will grow in
professionalism or be reduced to a hapless and helpless mess of high stakes testing and
competence frameworks (Hargreaves, 2000). Hargreaves attributes the change in culture to the
growth of the global economy and the proliferation of electronic and digital communications technology; both of these demand new ways of teaching, learning, and leading in our schools.

Judith Kafka’s historical study of the principalship (2009) has found that, while these current social and political vagaries demand a change in the building administrator’s job description, this is no different than the past in that they have always been subject to the pressures of the times. In other words, this balancing act has historically been the nature of the position. Building administrators have always been required to walk the tightrope that will satisfy the demands and meet the needs of the students and their parents, staff, the community, local, state and federal government, and, of course, district administration. However, “since the turn of the twenty-first century, the increasing emphasis on global accountability seems to have reignited interest in instructional leadership” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 221).

Our current educational culture is built on all that has gone before us and creates a foundation upon which new challenges and opportunities will further shape the schools of the future. This study seeks to explore a small part of this culture, but it first requires a clear definition of the kind of leadership required to meet these challenges.

**Instructional Leadership Defined**

When we take a broad look at the research literature surrounding instructional leadership, one thing is apparent: there is little agreement on how this is defined or what it looks like in practice (Chrispeels, 2004; Hallinger, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; McEwan, 2002; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Because the nature of this inquiry focuses on the experiences of a team of instructional leaders, it is important to note that this review of the literature is premised on the definition of *instructional* leadership that is *shared* by administrators, coaches, and teachers as derived from the broader definition of administrative
leadership (Childress et al., 2007; Chrispeels, 2004; Cobb, 2005; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Harris, 2003; Lovely, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005; Smylie, Lazarus, & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010). According to this research, this is the kind of transformative and shared leadership that is needed to make systemic and lasting change occur in our schools.

Shared leadership is contrasted to a more traditional, top-down, way of running a school. It is defined as the combined efforts of all of the school’s stakeholders, particularly administrators and teachers, in making the best decisions to improve the learning environment for all. The term distributed leadership has been used to describe a similar concept with small variations on the definitions (Chrispeels, 2004; Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2003; Mangin, 2007; Spillane & Healey, 2010; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Harris quotes Gronn in suggesting that “distributed leadership implies a different power relationship within the school where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur” (p. 316). According to the work of Spillane et al. (2007, 2010), this can be described as the leader-plus concept of education leadership wherein it is recognized that it takes more than a single principal to build and sustain true leadership in any school; instead, leadership can be enacted at all levels of the organizational structure.

But what is an instructional leader? McEwan (2002) quotes a principal of an award winning high school: “To be an instructional leader, you must be a person who eats and sleeps teaching and learning. Instructional leaders must constantly think about how to organize a school and instruction so all children can learn” (p. 10). This rather simple description requires a deeper look at some of the components of this concept as defined by Marzano et al. in *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results* (2005). According to these authors, the most
widely accepted definition of the dimensions of instructional leadership was proposed by Smith and Andrews in 1989: an instructional leader must function as a resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence (p. 18). While this list of responsibilities covers a broad range of the necessary attributes of this kind of leadership, others theorize that this kind of leader must possess, in addition, a strong moral code and the ability to motivate others in the organization to adopt and pursue the moral imperative that is inherent in the field of education (Bennis, 2003; Fullan, 2002). Without this belief in the higher calling of the job, it will be difficult to recruit and maintain the commitment of stakeholders to sustain the change process.

The truth of the matter is that the building principal is held responsible for everything that happens in her building. Because they are “always on the hot seat…, they would be impacted directly by any change in the time-honored, hierarchical structure” (Keedy, 1991, p. 4). For the last 30 years, building administrators have been expected to be instructional leaders and not just managers in the current educational climate and the pressures of school reform (Chrispeels, 2004; Cobb, 2005; Hallinger, 2005; Hart, 1995; Murphy, 2004). Even though administrators may be aware of the benefits to the school of unlocking the leadership and talents of all the teachers, this can be a difficult and muddled process. They may not have the skills or knowledge of how to empower teachers and build this shared leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Hart, 1995).

The principal alone will not be able to create the rich and complex literacy culture required to meet the diverse needs of our students. There are many components associated with this type of culture including establishing literacy as a priority, creating a Shared Vision, planning and providing professional development, securing quality materials, developing an assessment and accountability system, fostering a climate of collaboration and trust, and building relationships with parents and other stakeholders (Murphy, 2004; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May,
In other words, “the principal of a successful school is not the instructional leader but the coordinator of teachers as instructional leaders” (McEwan, 2002, p. 103).

Roland Barth sums up the issue of shared leadership beautifully: “I would like to put forward the revolutionary idea that all teachers can lead…if schools are going to become places where all children and adults are learning in worthy ways, all teachers must lead” (2001, p. 85). This revolutionary idea is shared by many who publish in the field. Spillane and Healey (2010) offer the caution that, while it would be foolish to believe that everyone can lead, it is important for the principal to be aware of both the actions and interactions of all her staff members and take steps to encourage and nurture the leadership of the all of the key players in the building.

Mangin reported in 2007 that there are several studies that show evidence that increased interactions between principals and instructional teacher leaders can lead to improved outcomes for school reform. It is in these shared interactions that knowledge and agency are constructed. This kind of leadership leads to principal and teacher learning as well as to improved collaboration around student learning goals (Barth, 2001; Chrispeels, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster, & Cobb, 1995).

However, there are few studies indicating that principals actually take an active, participatory approach to supervision and evaluation of classroom instruction; if it appears at all, it is primarily at the elementary level (Hallinger, 2005; Mangin, 2007; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Mangin notes that “we know little about how principals interact with and/or support teacher leaders or the kinds of conditions that might promote principals’ support” (2007, p. 324-325). Indeed, McEwan (2002) reports a survey that shows discrepancies between how principals perceive their instructional leadership and how it is experienced by teachers: Half of the principals reported that they spend time supervising teachers compared to teachers’ perception of
about 30%. There was an even greater discrepancy when asked about curriculum supervision: three fourths of principals see themselves as spending a large amount of time in that occupation while teachers think that less than half of them do. The author summarizes the survey as follows: “…many principals do not treat instructional leadership as their prime concern, except in response to questionnaires” (p. 12). Keedy’s research (1991) indicates that, although there are many benefits to instituting shared leadership programs, long term sustainability can be an issue. It is very difficult to continue the hard work of the “analysis and reflection process” (p. 21) when faced with the ongoing demands of running a school and teaching students. While a search of the literature yields an assortment of research, the field continues to need more documentation of this kind of shared leadership between principals and teachers, particularly the long term results, as well as new and improved research instruments specifically developed for education (Chrispeels, 2004; Lovely, 2005; Spillane & Healey, 2010).

There are many principals who do not have the experience and expertise in literacy necessary to support their teaching staff and ensure that high levels of targeted instruction are being provided and sustained. Since the focus of this study is not just leadership, but specifically instructional leadership related to literacy, a partnership between the principal and the literacy coach would combine the efforts and expertise of two vital change agents:

Individual principals or district leaders cannot improve students’ literacy habits and skills by themselves. Therefore, building the literacy leadership capacity of other administrators, literacy coaches, reading and media specialists, team leaders, department chairs, curriculum coordinators, and teachers must be a priority. It is only with the collaborative effort of people in all of these roles that a schoolwide literacy improvement
effort can be successfully launched and maintained. (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007, p. 178)

There are efforts to grow the literacy instruction expertise of building administrators such as the one described by Honig and her colleagues at the University of Washington (2012). This study involves three school districts whose central office administration had made a sustained commitment to improving the literacy knowledge of building principals by providing in-depth, job-embedded professional development through instructional coaches who spent extensive time working alongside the administrators in their buildings. These researchers report that, while there is a need for more professional development for building principals at the school level, there is little evidence in the research field for organized and sustained programs of this type.

Diane Sweeney, a long time expert in the field of school improvement, authored a book entitled Student-Centered Coaching: A Guide for K-8 Coaches and Principals (2011). In it, she makes the case for the partnership of principal and coach in order to create an embedded culture of learning in a school and supports the claim with her own experiences and observations. She has developed an assessment system and protocol for building this type of culture that includes roles for both principals and coaches. She maintains that, in order to effectively address the needs of every student, principals must maintain a learning stance, engage in the learning along with teachers, and hold teachers accountable for results that are student-centered and data-based (p. 51). Principals need to be fully aware of what is going on in classrooms by spending time there observing and participating. In Barth’s words, “The more crucial role of the principal is as head learner, engaging in the most important enterprise of the schoolhouse – experiencing, displaying, modeling, and celebrating what it is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will
do” (1995, p. 80). Let’s expand our vision of instructional leadership to what it looks like specifically in the area of literacy.

**Characteristics and Actions of the Effective Instructional Leader in Literacy**

The research offers us exciting insight into the importance of shared or distributed leadership in schools, as well as the characteristics of an instructional leader that may have the most significant impact on school improvement. Spillane (2006) helps us to make the connection between high levels of literacy and leadership in our schools: leadership practice is the relationship between the situation (which, in this case, is literacy improvement), leaders and followers. This study seeks to examine the practices of the Lakeside district leaders who have a direct impact on literacy instruction.

This begs the question: What does instructional leadership look like, particularly at the middle school level? The Rand Report (2009) on effective school leadership suggests that the most effective principals “spend more time in direct classroom supervision and support of teachers…, work with teachers to coordinate the school’s instructional program, [and] help solve instructional problems collaboratively” (p. 29).

Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007) recommend five action steps necessary to improve adolescent literacy achievement based on their “review of the research, interviews with school leaders, careful examination of the roles of leaders in successful schoolwide literacy efforts, and ongoing discussion with school and district leaders” (p. 15). For the purpose of clarity, I will use these five steps as the framework for additional research on effective school leadership: Develop and Implement a Schoolwide Literacy Action Plan, Support Teachers to Improve Instruction, Use Data to Make Decisions about Literacy Teaching and Learning, Build Leadership Capacity, and Allocate Resources to Support Literacy. Where apropos, I will show the connection between
these leadership actions and the disciplines of Systems Thinking. In Chapter Four, there is evidence of understanding the importance of these effective practices and principles in the study’s interviews and focus group conversations.

**Develop and implement a schoolwide literacy action plan.** There is consistent agreement in the literature as to the school leaders’ responsibility for crafting and sharing a vision for the school (Childress et al., 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2002; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hart, 1995; Lambert, 2003; McEwan, 2002; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). In fact, Hallinger (2005) reports that an extensive review of the research done since 1980 on instructional leadership shows that it is in shaping the school mission that the principal exerts the greatest influence on school achievement. However, the connection of this vision to a schoolwide literacy plan is not always clear. According to Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007), a schoolwide literacy plan is paramount if leaders are committed to meeting the literacy needs of all students. And while school leaders may craft plans, many have not come to fruition in observable action and data-supported results for lack of effective implementation and use (Hallinger, 2005; Irvin et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2011).

Following the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, every school literacy action plan should include a deep understanding of and commitment to implementation of those standards. Leaders at all levels should be conversant in the standards themselves as well as the shifts that the English/Language Arts and Literacy standards will bring to our instructional practices: 1) Balancing informational and literary text, 2) Building knowledge of disciplines, 3) Staircase of complexity, 4) Text-based answers, 5) Writing from sources, and 6) Academic vocabulary (EngageNY, 2015).
Evidence of this component of leadership would be discussion of a vision to improve literacy instruction for all students (Bennis, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005), connection to a moral purpose (Fullan, 2007b), discussion of the change process (Fullan, 2007b), the new Common Core State Standards, and district and school plans for school improvement specifically in the area of literacy. This action step is directly related to the development of a Shared Vision in Senge’s Systems Thinking (2006); the most effective leaders are able to inspire members of their organization to enroll in this vision and commit to bringing it to reality by choice.

Support teachers to improve instruction. Research has clearly indicated the primary importance of the teacher in determining student achievement (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Allington, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Irvin et al., 2007). “The role of school leaders is to ensure that all teachers have the support and guidance they need to improve students’ literacy development” (Irvin et al., 2007). Therefore, it is vital that school leaders make this a priority in their practice.

Providing the necessary professional development is vital for building teacher capacity. This may include literacy practices across content areas, strategies for differentiation, the use of data, effective use of materials and curriculum, assessment procedures, student motivation, technology, etc., as well as choices for self-selected topics for learning (Irvin et al., 2007; Ogle & Lang, 2007). It should be noted that there is sufficient support in the literature to say that it is important for building and district administrators to take part in teacher learning experiences in order to build common focus and goals on a vertical level and convey the importance of a collaborative learning culture (Barth 1995; Hallinger, 2005; Irvin et al., 2007).

In addition, research acknowledges the importance of the following in developing teachers’ confidence and skills in instruction: professional learning communities (DuFour,
DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Irvin et al., 2007) and literacy coaching (Dorn & Soffos, 1998; Irvin et al., 2007; L’Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; McKenna & Walpole, 2008).

If this teacher support is to become self-sustaining and yield results, instructional leaders will have to monitor implementation in an ongoing effort; Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes suggest that this may include such structures as judicious use of teacher evaluation, new teacher support, literacy walk-throughs, and classroom observations (2007, p. 151). The Wallace Foundation study reported that teachers in the study made a clear distinction between those principals who “popped in” or were “visible” and those who had a clear interest, investment, and understanding of the literacy instruction that was going on in the classroom (2010, p. 13).

Evidence of leadership in this area would include direct work with teachers on and specific discussion of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, presence and participation in classroom instruction, constructive evaluation that results in improved instruction, building strong relationships, creating structures that allow opportunities for collaboration and learning, plans for knowledge building and sharing in professional development, and connecting new knowledge with existing knowledge, particularly in relation to the shifts in curriculum and instruction resulting from the Common Core State Standards (Fullan, 2007a; Hallinger, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005), in addition to the specific literacy practices mentioned above.

This component is directly related to the disciplines of Team Learning and Personal Mastery of Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006). Literacy leaders would encourage stakeholders to coordinate and align their learning goals for the purpose of achieving the vision through Team Learning. The concept of being a lifelong learner is expressed in the discipline of Personal
Mastery; people who possess this characteristic are never done learning or seeking to improve themselves and their organization.

**Use data to make decisions about literacy teaching and learning.** Traditionally, many teachers have made decisions about instruction based on what they know best and what they believe works rather than collecting and analyzing information from student work to better target differentiated needs. In order to bring about effective and sustained improvement, school leaders must develop a consistent structure to provide access to the most pertinent data, training, and time for analyzing and discussing it, along with a plan for continuous improvement and fidelity to the process (Irvin et al., 2007; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Schmoker, 2006).

It appears that the use of data for improving student achievement must be a practice at all levels of the organization. An interesting conundrum arose in The Wallace Foundation’s study of leadership practice (2010): The principal’s role in establishing the expectations for and use of data and providing the professional development necessary to do this effectively was determined to be paramount in improving student achievement. However, this practice was found to be inconsistent unless sufficient support, pressure and oversight are provided by district administration.

Evidence of this leadership aptitude would be discussion that shows clear understanding of the building’s or district’s data related to literacy assessment on both a local and state level using a variety of measures, collaborative efforts to reflect on, analyze, and use the results to drive instruction, goal setting based on student assessment data for both teachers and students, and plans and efforts to support teacher and administrator learning in this area (Darling-Hammond, 2009; DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Irvin et al., 2007; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Schmoker, 2006; Schmoker, 2011).
If our schools are focused on improving student learning, then our leaders should show evidence of their understanding of the importance of using this learning data in their daily practice.

**Build leadership capacity.** Here again, the research shows that a leadership characteristic, in this case, building leadership capacity, is an effective practice only when it is enacted at all levels. According to Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007), “building the literacy leadership capacity of ...administrators, literacy coaches, reading and media specialists, team leaders, department chairs, curriculum coordinators, and teachers must be a priority [so that] a schoolwide literacy improvement effort can be successfully launched and maintained” (p. 178). The inherent rationale in a distributed leadership model is that, in addition to the administrators, all these stakeholders will take ownership in the school improvement process and contribute to the literacy initiative (Irvin et al., 2007; Smylie et al., 1996; Spillane, 2006).

Evidence of leadership capacity building practice may include leadership training, shared responsibilities for school projects and initiatives, acknowledgement of varied staff members’ contributions to school improvement efforts, and decision making at different levels of the organization (Irvin et al., 2007; Marzano et al., 2005; Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

While the responsibilities of our district and building administrators are vast and heavy, we cannot create sustained school improvement unless that leadership is shared among a broader constituency. This study will explore the efforts to build that leadership capacity.

**Allocate resources to support literacy.** The Wallace Foundation study (2010) indicates that principals credit provision of both human and financial resources as a vital contribution to
their ability to effect positive change at the building level, while acknowledging that resources alone will not make a difference in school improvement.

Given the current shortage of education support funds, the savvy school leader will be creative in her reallocation of resources and be open to creative use of what is currently available (Irvin et al., 2007). Involving teachers and other staff members in making decisions about innovative ways to use time, space, personnel, and funds will increase their commitment to the process and contribute to long term success of the literacy plan.

Evidence of this allocation of resources can include mention of the needs of the staff and the students, as well as providing “time, space, personnel, professional development, funding, technology, and materials” in an effort to contribute to the school’s literacy action plan (Irvin et al., 2007; Marzano et al., 2005; Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

Thoughtful planning and distribution of our limited resources are an important part of a leader’s responsibility in our schools, especially considering that the need is great and the outcomes are so critically important.

**Conclusion.** Although it is difficult to pinpoint all of the specific characteristics that make a true leader, the research provides us with enough evidence of effective practices in both literacy leadership and Systems Thinking to form a framework for what to expect of those people who are leading the efforts to provide the best education possible for all students. The previous section shows the relationship between the Literacy Action Steps and three of the disciplines of Systems Thinking: Shared Vision, Personal Mastery and Team Learning. In addition to the above attributes, I will also attempt to uncover the more elusive evidence of overall Systems Thinking and the Mental Models that the participants may hold that contribute to their actions in literacy leadership (see Appendix E).
The Literacy Coach’s Contribution to Instructional Leadership

As discussed above, it is impossible for a building administrator to shoulder the burden of school improvement alone; the research literature clearly shows that a building leader’s ability to share responsibility and collaborate with other building stakeholders and leaders can make a strong impact on building culture and even student achievement (Irvin et al., 2007). Sturtevant’s review of literacy coaching initiatives in 2003 found that those programs whose professional development included collaboration between stakeholders including the literacy coach, teachers and principals were the most effective as measured by improved student achievement scores. In this study, she defined the coach’s leadership responsibilities as including creation and supervision of “a long term staff development process that supports both the development and the implementation of the literacy program over months and years” (p. 11). However, she makes it clear that the management and supervisory responsibilities belong to the principals, and their involvement in all of these instructional decisions “cannot be overemphasized. Administrators must know what changes are being asked of the teachers, and why. They must be a part of the process, approving programs and providing the necessary support to bring changes to fruition” (p. 12). In the context of my research study, the responsibilities for planning and implementing Common Core instruction would be considered a major part of this staff development process.

In 2006, the International Reading Association, working in conjunction with several other professional organizations, published the standards for middle and high school literacy coaches in order to set high expectations for the literacy skills needed by adolescents. These standards include, among others, a strong foundation in literacy skills as well as effective leadership ability in order to successfully interact with both youth and adult learners.
The leadership skills required by the IRA standards include collaborative work with both teachers and principals, assessing the literacy needs of the building, devising a plan to address these needs, and maintaining a neutral stance when it comes to evaluating teachers. McKenna and Walpole describe the leadership responsibilities of a middle school literacy coach as “a tall order…[that] demands constant learning on the part of the coach” (2008, p. 151).

In addition to the job requirements for this position, literacy coaches and administrators must also be cognizant of the challenges of the designated teacher leadership role that the coach must assume. The coach at the middle school level faces even further unique challenges.

The work of a middle school literacy coach is different from that of an elementary coach because of the nature of a middle school’s organization (McKenna & Walpole, 2008). In addition to typical resistance of many teachers to what they see as a literacy coach’s interference with their private domain of classroom instruction, middle school coaches may face additional opposition. Middle school coaches deal not only with the challenges of supporting literacy instruction across content areas, but also face more resistance to coaching from teachers who consider themselves content area experts rather than reading and writing teachers and who may believe that literacy instruction belongs in the lower grades (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Irvin et al., 2007; Ogle & Lang, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Smith’s study of three middle school coaches suggests that this reluctance to be coached may be attributed to a combination of lack of literacy instruction on the part of the content area teachers along with their perception that teaching reading and writing will detract from time needed to teach the subject matter (2007). This resistance requires careful nurturing of an honest and trusting relationship between teachers and coach that is clearly separated from any evaluative responsibility on the part of the coach as well as a willingness to learn from and collaborate with the content area teachers.
McKenna and Walpole suggest that coaches develop a “practical theory” to consider all possibilities for teacher resistance in order to formulate a plan for building productive relationships; these can include fear of change, low expectations for students, philosophical differences, and a lack of self-efficacy (2008, p. 132). A middle school’s organization around content area teams can offer opportunities for the coach to reach a broader community of teachers with relative safety and comfort compared to individual work with teachers who might feel singled out. Patience and persistence, as well as willingness to listen and learn, will be rewarded and contribute to a coach’s leadership influence in the building.

Another significant challenge for the middle school coach is the ingrained sense of failure and futility felt by many of the students who continue to struggle with reading and writing skills after they leave elementary school (Beers, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2008; O’Brien & Dillon, 2008; Wilhelm, 2008). This offers another form of resistance for the coach who works directly with students or offers support to teachers who are providing interventions to striving readers and writers. As a literacy coach relies on her diagnostic and prescriptive reading expertise to develop a flexible model of interventions to meet students’ individual needs, she can use this knowledge to create a collegial professional development plan that will strengthen the intervention expertise of teachers who also work with these students (Jetton & Dole, 2004). Middle school teachers are less likely to understand the value of direct instruction of comprehension strategies, reading and writing reciprocity, or a “thematic and integrative focus across content areas for all students, but particularly for those who are striving to reach grade level benchmarks” (Smith, 2007, p. 55).

Smith (2007) suggests that the wide range of coaching responsibilities at the middle school level leads to fragmentation of the coaching process and dilutes the effectiveness of the coach. He attributes part of this disconnection to the fact that coaching goals and responsibilities
do not align with the practice and beliefs of content area teachers. Because of this fragmentation, Smith concludes that, although middle school literacy coaching has potential to impact change, it has inconsistent effectiveness.

Much of the literature on literacy coaching shows that there is a great deal of inconsistency in defining the coach’s duties (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Mraz et al., 2008; Quatroche & Wepner, 2008; Sweeney, 2011). If this is true, it can be assumed that coaches’ leadership responsibilities are also varied depending on the school or district context. When a coach’s responsibility consists of coordinating a school’s reading literacy program and its assessment system, the coach then is stepping into the realm of leadership and indeed, is often considered to be “part of the management team” (Mraz et al., 2008, p. 147) by both teachers and principals. In fact, when one researcher asked district principals which expenditure was most important to keep in the following year’s budget, they unanimously responded that it was their coach positions (Petti, 2010).

Regardless of the exact definition or job description of a literacy coach, the very nature of a coaching position denotes change and improvement that cannot be enacted unless the coach bears leadership responsibility for the systemic change that is required in real school improvement (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Rodgers & Rodgers, 2007). The coach’s leadership work must be tailored to the specific needs of the school and its students in order for this to occur. Besides sharing in the school improvement planning and goal setting, the coach serves a unique position in being able to plan and provide the professional development that the staff needs in order to build and sustain the energy and knowledge which will make a difference in the achievement of all students. Guskey’s extended research into effective professional development concludes that it must be based on student achievement data
as the criteria for effectiveness, be tailored to the school’s specific context and needs, and build the capacity for teacher knowledge and sharing what already works in this school (Guskey, 2002; Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). The IRA standards for coaching make it clear that these are responsibilities of the literacy coach along working with her principal (International Reading Association, 2006; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Sweeney, 2011). Rodgers and Rodgers urge that “administrators think of literacy coaching as providing the necessary pressure for change, as a tool for ongoing professional renewal that will lead to enhanced student learning” (2007, p. 140).

Mraz et al. (2008) trace the beginning of this new leadership to the reauthorization of ESEA (No Child Left Behind) where the reading specialist role was expanded to more of a coaching position that shares leadership with administrators and teachers. Contributing to these new responsibilities are the emphasis on high stakes testing and the adoption of new federal and state standards and mandates.

Because the job of school leadership and improvement is just too complex for the principal to accomplish alone, the literacy coach has quickly risen to share the responsibility of building a culture of learning in her school (Knight, 2007; L’Allier et al., 2010; Matsumura, Sartoris, Bickel, & Garnier, 2009; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Sweeney, 2011). According to L’Allier, Elish-Piper, and Bean (2010), coaches frequently assume leadership responsibilities which include setting goals and building teacher effectiveness in order to improve the learning culture of the school; these authors note that the most influential coaches work closely with their administrators in order to have a voice in important decisions. Sweeney believes that the most effective way to improve student learning is through student-centered coaching which is built on a partnership between principal and coach so that they stand together to create a sustainable learning organization (2011). By sustainable, this means that the teachers and support staff will
be able to take on the responsibility for continuous improvement at all levels of learning in the school once they have been trained in the process. Just as the principal has specific roles in this process as mentioned above, the coach is responsible for maintaining a learning stance herself and supporting and encouraging teachers to maintain their focus on student learning as they work to improve their practice (Sweeney, 2011, p. 52).

In actuality, the middle school coach’s contribution to instructional leadership is only as strong as the principal’s support for her work toward that end. Smith’s study of middle school coaches concluded that “it was clear that the influence of the principal was significant. The principal appeared to have a great deal of power in shaping the roles the coach assumed and the ways the coach interacted with teachers” (2007, p. 60). Without the support of the building administrators, the leadership of literacy coaches will fall far short of its potential and have little impact on the instructional culture of the school.

Steiner and Kowal (2007) suggest that making good use of classroom level instructional coaches can actually be an effective solution to a principal’s problem of having too many responsibilities and not enough time to fulfill them:

This division of labor allows school leaders to focus on other core tasks associated with effective leadership—setting a vision, fostering a sense of urgency and high expectations, creating a collaborative culture focused on student needs, and engaging the community—as well as the managerial aspects of their jobs that cannot be shifted elsewhere. (p.1)

These authors stress the importance of the principal’s continued involvement with the coaching program at her school in order to achieve the true benefits of these efforts. They conclude that “the research evidence suggests that strong instructional leaders greatly can impact teaching and learning,” and that the coach “can play an effective role in improving classroom level practices”
In order to achieve this, the principal must take on the “role of instructional leader…to serve as a ‘chief’ coach for teachers by designing and supporting strong classroom level instructional coaching” (p. 6).

After almost twenty years of research on instructional coaching, Jim Knight believes that schools need a partnership approach in order to be successful (2007). While it is necessary for the principal to be the instructional leader of a school, a coach must function as the right-hand person; these key players must understand each other’s position and fully support each other’s work. Knight and Fullan go so far as to suggest that failing schools will be unable to succeed in their reform efforts without coaches, and “the work of coaches will be squandered if school principals are not instructional leaders” (2011, p. 50). Now, more than ever, a literacy coach’s expertise will be beneficial in creating bridges of literacy across all content areas with the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

**Common Core State Standards**

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Math were published in June of 2010 and were adopted by this state on June 24, 2010, thereby making our state a part of the educational movement which is the closest thing we have ever had to nationally-aligned standards. As of this writing, 43 states, four territories, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and the District of Columbia have also adopted these standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015a). However, it should be noted that some of these states were in the process of reviewing their commitment to the standards at this time based on political pressures from their legislatures and constituents. Five of the original adopter states have since dropped out of the movement; for example, Oklahoma, Indiana and South Carolina all repealed their adoption of the standards in 2014 (Bidwell, 2014; Exstrom & Thatcher, 2014; Turner, 2014).
The Common Core State Standards initiative developed out of a growing concern that students leaving most K-12 schools were not prepared to meet the rigor of college and career. A joint effort of the National Governors’ Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, supported by Achieve, ACT, and The College Board, convened a task force of educators, politicians, and researchers to create a draft of standards that would raise the expectations of all grade levels in order to better prepare students to become productive and successful 21st century global citizens (Carmichael, Wilson, Finn, Winkler, & Palmieri, 2009).

According to the State of the State Standards report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute which compares state standards to the Common Core in 2010, thirteen states and the District of Columbia had standards whose quality was at least equal to or better than the CCSS. The state in which I did my research received a grade of D using their criteria (Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, p. 118). This low grade is a result of the fact that this state had not updated its English Language Arts standards since 1997; a previous evaluation of these standards received a much healthier grade of B and ranked this state as 11th in the nation along with an even higher score in 2000 (Stotsky, 2005). However, under the current and more stringent review process, it was determined that our English and Language Arts standards were “clearly inferior” to the Common Core, and that the adoption of the new standards is the first step in the direction of overhauling the state’s education system to better prepare our students (Carmichael et al., 2010, p.8).

Once the adoption had taken place, it was incumbent upon the state and the school districts to begin the implementation process. The Common Core State Standards present a unique challenge and opportunity to the field of education as we embark on a journey which carries with it a multitude of potential roadblocks along the way.
The creators of the Core Standards have made it clear that implementation, instruction, and materials must be left to the discretion of schools and teachers: “By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b, p. 4). A review of the literature shows a concern for how these standards will be adopted and implemented (Beach, 2011; Kern, 2014; Watt, 2011). If a school district wants to allow teacher professional judgment in implementing the standards, they will plan professional development and opportunities for collaboration and curriculum work for their staff. If they choose to “teacher proof” the adoption (Beach, 2011), they will mandate the use of lockstep curriculum programs for all grade levels. The possible challenges that exist on this continuum of adoption practices are myriad, beginning with a rigid and literal interpretation of the literacy practices therein to an authentic, socially constructed understanding of the genres and practices. The language of the ELA standards contains broad generalizations (lack of clarity and specificity) while at the same time leaving open the possibility of interpreting various literary terms in different ways (Carmichael et al., 2010; Watt, 2011).

In addition to concerns about how the Standards will be implemented, states and districts have also expressed concerns over how the process will be funded in an era of shrinking education dollars. The federal government provided initial funds in Race to the Top offering support to some states for innovative adoption efforts; in fact, the National Governors Association Update to the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee encouraged the federal government to take on a role that is “less restrictive and mandate-driven and more encouraging of innovation” (Ritter, 2009, p. 4). In a survey of 37 states conducted by the Center on Education Policy, 61% of respondents feared that states’ authority to interpret and implement these common
standards would be subject to interference from Washington as future federal education dollars could possibly be tied to strict adherence to a national plan (Kober & Rentner, 2011, p. 4). Knowing the current budget crisis that this state is struggling with, there is valid reason for concern that the state will not be able to provide the resources and assistance that our districts need for effective implementation.

At the same time, districts wonder about the how much support and individual direction the federal and state education agencies will provide as the process of implementation continues (Kober & Rentner, 2011). Besides the concerns with using the standards as the basis of fragmented skill-based instruction with no integration or coherence between content areas, there can also be disagreement on how to understand and interpret key instructional terms and vocabulary of the CCSS. This issue is aggravated by the differences in states’ perceptions of the Common Core Standards as being either more or less rigorous than their own, which will affect the ways they integrate them with their current standards (Beach, 2011). For example, the practical application of challenging students by raising the level of text complexity raises many issues as to appropriate levels and text topics for students, as well as how to best support teachers as they hone the skills necessary to meet these higher standards. Tom Newkirk voiced the concern that the standards have been matched to the most proficient students and may lead to further frustration for students who are at risk (2010).

At the current time, a search of the State Board of Education website offers a number of resources for implementing the new State Standards in the form of webinars and face-to-face seminars (http://www.isbe.net/common_core/htmls/workshops.htm). In addition, there are presentations, articles, links, and a video series to inform stakeholders about the new PARCC assessment. The district in this study is presently taking advantage of the state’s resources as well
as developing its own plan for an effective and successful implementation of the new Standards; these plans will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

As mentioned earlier, the current state of the Common Core State Standards changes almost daily with some states who were initial adopters dropping out of the initiative, and additional states considering doing the same at the time of this writing (Bidwell, 2014). While the political ramifications of adoption and revision of the Standards are being debated, the remaining Common Core states are in varied stages of implementation.

The Center on Education Policy published a report in June 2013 on Year Three of implementation that was based on a survey of 40 states that had adopted the Common Core Standards. They found that 39 of the states had begun state-level preparation for the standards, 37 had begun to provide professional development for their teachers, the remaining planned to do so in the 2013-14 school year, and 30 reported that CCSS-aligned instruction was already taking place in classrooms (Rentner, 2013).

Let’s take a look at an exemplar CCSS state. In the Summer 2014 issue, Education Next took an in depth look at the pros and cons of the standards at this point in the implementation process. Kentucky was highlighted as making great strides through a consistent statewide effort to ensure that the CCSS become an integral part of classroom instruction. They sponsor monthly professional development meetings in eight regions across the state for teachers to discuss issues related to adoption and implementation, “propose lessons, develop assessments, and pore over materials designed to help other teachers in their home schools and districts to implement the standards” (Rothman, 2014, p. 17). The state department has created an online portal to disseminate the most up-to-date information and instructional resources to all of its teachers. Kentucky’s efforts to prepare schools as well as the public began in 2010, and students took their
first Common Core-aligned state test in 2012; while scores on that initial test dropped compared to the test for the previous standards, the 2013 improvement showed the leaders that they were on the right track to college and career readiness. The author points out that “while Kentucky, the first to adopt the standards, is far ahead of most other states, these kinds of efforts are going on throughout the country” (p. 17).

As indicated in the Year Three Implementation Report (Rentner, 2013), Common Core states are in various stages of integrating the new standards into their classrooms. Colorado chose to pilot the CCSS in 13 districts which will then share their experiences with the rest of the state while New York hired private nonprofits to design Common Core-aligned curriculum (Rothman, 2014).

So while the rationale that drove the creation of common standards was to ensure consistent high quality instruction for all students across the nation, the implementation was left up to states and local districts; as a result, there is much variation across the country which continues to fuel the concerns of those who are opposed to such a movement. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, stated that in some states, “the poor rollout of the Common Core had led to ‘immobilization’ among teachers and a distrust that those in positions of authority knew how to do the job right” (Ujifusa, 2014). However, the vast majority of the states that have adopted the standards continue to move forward with the belief that their students will be better prepared for the future because these are more rigorous than their previous standards and will improve students’ skills in these subjects (Rentner, 2013; Scholastic, Inc., & The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

The influence of local context cannot be ignored in school reform. Brock’s research on early implementation of the CCSS at three Midwest suburban middle school indicates that a
major reform such as the Common Core begins cohesively at the top and then becomes more
diluted as it reaches the local school level which leads ultimately to inconsistencies. She
contends that “local agents make interpretations and modify policy as they work to understand
and implement the reform” (2014, p.118). She summarizes her findings by stating:

…perhaps a systemic approach to local school reform implementation can aid in
tightening standards-based reform and diminishing inequities that plague local control.
Lack of a systemic approach continues to create inequity among schools when standards-
based reform appears to be coherent at the legislative level. By understanding the
impending reform and developing a systematic approach to implementation, school
officials and principals can work to reduce inconsistency at the school level. (p. 124)

For the purposes of this study, discussion about the Common Core State Standards refers
to both the English Language Arts Standards (ELA) and the Standards for Literacy in
History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects for grades 6-8. These are the Standards
that will most significantly impact middle school literacy instruction, particularly with the
emphasis on the seamless integration of literacy into instruction of all content areas. “Just as
students must learn to read, write, speak, listen and use language effectively in a variety of
content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and understandings required
for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines” (Common Core State Standards
Initiative, 2015b, p. 3).

The Language Arts Standards address the language arts skills of reading, writing,
speaking, listening, and language, and the creators of the standards intend that the instruction of
these skills will be closely connected in order to create cohesion across subject areas. Both the
Language Arts and Content Area strands are divided into broad categories that cross all grade
levels from K-12 and must be addressed in implementation and curriculum planning: Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, and Range of Reading.

Concurrent with the implementation of the new Standards are the changes that will occur as all of the adopting states prepare for a new assessment system (Kober & Rentner, 2011). Changing the state assessment system carries with it a host of challenges that will also have to be addressed. There are multiple assessment efforts underway whose goal will be to assess progress toward the Common Core State Standards. The federally-funded States Assessment Consortia consists of two comprehensive assessment groups: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, two alternate assessment consortia, The Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) and the National Center and State Collaborative (NSCS), and an English Language Proficiency (ELP) Consortium (Center for K-12 Assessment & Performance Management at ETS, 2012). Additionally, there are private concerns who are developing assessments for individual states, as well as state partnerships.

The state in which I worked and conducted this study is a member of the PARCC consortium that is comprised of 14 states and the District of Columbia at the time of this writing (http://www.parcconline.org/parcc-states). The new assessment system was scheduled to begin during the 2014-15 school year and consists of five components, two of which will be given near the end of the school year and will be used to calculate the annual combined accountability scores for each student (Center for K-12 Assessment & Performance Management at ETS, 2012). Since most of these tests will be given on computers in an online format, it is anticipated that a major overhaul of technology infrastructure and student preparation will be needed. In fact, as many of the tests were rolled out in the spring of 2015, states and districts across the country
were reporting multiple delays and technology glitches (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2015).

One final point of importance is that the creators of the CCSS are clear that implementation is left to the discretion of the local school entity as stated by their emphasis of the focus being on the “results rather than means” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b, p. 4). With the intention being to allow states, districts, and schools to make their own curricular and instructional decisions, the responsibility lies clearly with the Lakeside School District leadership to implement a plan that will support their teachers in their efforts to provide the best literacy instruction to prepare students for high school, college, and career.

The adoption of the CCSS was the first time in my 15 years of working for this district that I had seen such an attention to standards as administrators and teachers struggled to understand the impact of the Common Core State Standards in this early phase; prior to this, state standards were little more than background music or wallpaper that goes almost unnoticed. What luck for the researcher who is interested in instructional leadership! This common goal for all stakeholders now created the perfect laboratory for my research. Thus, I will examine the experiences of instructional leaders on their journey toward adopting the Common Core Standards.

**Building a Learning Community Based on Systems Thinking**

The participants in this research study have an established goal in the Common Core, but it is important that we have a framework against which to measure the effectiveness of this journey. Recall, if you will, the picture book, *Zoom*, that moves us quickly from the small view of a rooster’s comb, through a multitude of growing images, until we see the universe in its
entirety. Systems Thinking requires that same mind shift. In order to build a truly successful organization, we must learn to see how the individual parts function together as an entire process. While Peter Senge’s work was originally designed for business, its focus on building learning organizations has much to offer the field of education. According to Senge, Systems Thinking is predicated on the disciplines of building Shared Vision and Mental Models, Personal Mastery, and Team Learning (2006). While discussing characteristics of effective instructional leaders earlier in this chapter, I showed how three of the Systems Thinking disciplines, Shared Vision, Personal Mastery, and Team Learning, coordinate with the leadership needed to create a successful literacy initiative as proposed by Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007). It is in the interplay and mastery of these disciplines that professional learning organizations are born and nurtured when the participants at all levels of school systems are committed to learning and growing. According to Senge and Lannon-Kim, “With prescriptions for turning around America’s schools coming from every part of the political spectrum, re-conceiving schools as learning organizations may be the overarching vision needed to guide the difficult changes ahead” (1991, p. 9).

Systems Thinking, as the theoretical foundation of my study, is a way of looking at an organization as a whole instead of as fragmented parts and includes focusing on ways to bring the pieces and members into alignment and cooperation with each other. Within a school district, as in any organization, it is all too easy to become fixated on your own narrow point of view and miss the larger picture, which is made up of those interrelated and interdependent parts of the picture, just as in the book, Zoom.

An important first step in building a learning organization is to create an integrated curriculum within and among schools (Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991) that will be a part of the
Shared Vision of the organization, and the Common Core provides just the guidelines needed for this shift. Talk about vision and values is rampant in education, but a true, enacted Shared Vision is hard to find. Senge (2006) describes a genuine vision as one in which all participants voluntarily commit to the learning that is needed in order to bring about this future. In the field of education, it may be argued that every member is committed to the vision of creating a world of success for all students, but getting members to agree just how to arrive there is a different argument.

In order for an organization to create a Shared Vision, it is necessary for each member to examine the Mental Models of his or her own thinking and actions and to be open to others’ thinking and actions. Administrators and teachers alike may have conflicting Mental Models of what the other should act like, thereby reducing the possibility of working together to achieve a Shared Vision. In addition to the problem of conflicting Models, it is likely that in a complex system, many of us are lacking the fully developed Mental Models we need to be successful in our position. The work of creating a culture that is based on honesty, inquiry, personal awareness, and reflective skills is reflected in a learning organization that is consciously building and revising this infrastructure in order to provide all the players with the tools needed to strengthen the system (Senge, 2006).

Another vital discipline to be cultivated in Systems Thinking is that of Personal Mastery in which every member is committed to the learning and growth necessary to be able to do the rigorous work of building the Shared Vision. Senge (2006) describes this commitment as resulting from the creative tension between the vision of what we want to be and the current reality of where we are now. This tension results in the desire to learn in order to close the gap
between what is and what should be, or the “lifelong generative learning” (p. 132) that results in
the drive for Personal Mastery.

It is clear that none of this can be achieved in a vacuum; rather it requires the discipline
of Team Learning to harness the talents and efforts of all members in order to achieve the Shared
Vision. According to Fullan and Knight, any school improvement must treat the entire school
district as a single system with leadership from the top down all working together to achieve the
same purposes; “the role of school leadership – of principals and coaches – must be played out
on a systems level to get widespread and sustainable improvement” (2011, p. 51). Senge (2006)
uses a powerful visual image to describe efforts of an unaligned team: many arrows shooting off
in all directions within a single larger arrow that is headed in one direction. This is an appropriate
metaphor for teachers within a school, schools and administrators within a district, districts
within a state, and states within the country where it may be argued that most of us are working
extremely hard but few of us are working together. As Senge says, “Individual learning, at some
level, is irrelevant for organizational learning” (2006, p. 219). Once the team members are able
to open a true dialog with each other, they will expose the roadblocks to Team Learning and
pave the way for shared generative learning needed to move the organization forward. In Chapter
Three, I will discuss how Systems Thinking will be used as a framework for analyzing the
language of the research participants in their interviews and focus group sessions.

Conclusion

Schools are expected to be places of learning, not just for students, but for all members of
the educational system. Teachers and administrators must be open to continual learning and
growth in order to prepare our children for the ever-changing world into which they will
graduate. “An organization’s ability to learn may make the difference between its thriving or
perishing,” according to Peter Senge (O’Neil, 1995, p. 20), and yet research and experience show that true learning may simply be receiving lip-service in many corners of the education world. In my personal experience at the school level, teachers are frustrated with what they perceive as constant change based on top-down mandates that they don’t believe in; consequently, there is little commitment to these directives or reason to hope that teachers’ input will make a serious impact on new directions. These feelings are part of the Mental Models and relationships of our school system, and my research has shown that this attitude is not unique to my community of Lakeside (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2002; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; O’Neil, 1995; Reeves, 2009). Adults at all levels of education must be committed to enhancing their own learning capacity and that of their entire school system for the benefit of the students and themselves. This speaks to a core concept of learning organizations in Systems Thinking:

If you want to improve a school system, before you change the rules, look first to the ways that people think and interact together. Otherwise, the new policies and organizational structures will simply fade away, and the organization will revert, over time, to the way it was before (Senge et al., 2000, p. 19).

My review of the research literature suggests that school leaders must continually maintain a learning stance and develop ways to create and share leadership with their staff in order to nurture a collaborative and supportive learning community. This form of leadership requires building relationships among all stakeholders and maintaining the focus on the moral imperative of improving student achievement. Because of the nature of the job description and qualifications, it is evident that literacy coaches possess the potential for contributing to and shaping the Systems Thinking that will create a sustainable learning organization. Their literacy
instruction expertise will be necessary as districts across the country adopt the Common Core State Standards and build a strong literacy focus across the curriculum. Application of Systems Thinking could provide a strong framework for building and nurturing this vision and will be used as the basis for analysis of the data to determine if there is any evidence of its use or understanding in building the learning community in this school district (Senge, 2001).
Chapter Three
Methodology

Introduction

The metaphor of the picture book *Zoom* is apropos to the discussion of the methodology of this study. The questions of this study are intended to widen the lens beyond individuals to view the learning system of this school district and how this system is growing and changing with the advent of the Common Core State Standards. The reader is reminded of the researcher’s emic position in this process; I am not so much seeking universal understandings here as I am looking for meaning and understanding within my own education culture. It is my hope that the results of this study will allow us to zoom out to see connections to other similar school districts who are struggling, as this district is, with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. If not, I will have documented the development and engagement of a particular district that occupies a small corner of the Midwest landscape and provided an in-depth analysis of the shared instructional leadership that has resulted from the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Since my earliest experiences with district leadership, my interest in instructional leadership prepared the ground for this latest intense scrutiny. Many events and observations have shaped my understanding of the leadership in my district, but a specific experience bears mentioning here as it had a great influence on my preferred methodology for this research.

Various reading assignments, research, and discussions in my doctoral courses had heightened my interest in just how leadership is enacted with relation to instruction of students. My personal experiences as a teacher and then as a literacy coach led me to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of certain administrative and teacher leaders and their influence, both
positive and negative, on the instructional culture of schools. When I was given the assignment to conduct and analyze an interview in a qualitative research course, I decided to ask an administrator about how he or she understood the responsibilities of instructional leadership. From what I learned in that first interview, I became intrigued and decided to conduct several more because what I was learning in each and every instance was not what I was expecting to hear. I fully expected and even encouraged principals to discuss the teacher leaders in their buildings who exhibited instructional leadership. However, I found that, when given the chance to reflect on instructional leadership, every one zoomed in on the building literacy coach’s leadership and the shared leadership they were building with her. Keep in mind that the district’s coaching model was new and the coaches had been in the buildings just a little over a year at this point. Despite redirection to discuss the evidence of teacher leadership before the implementation of coaching, principals returned again and again to what their literacy coach was doing to bring about change in their literacy culture; it became clear that each and every administrator relied on his or her literacy coach to share the responsibilities and burdens of building the literacy culture in the school. What I learned in these interviews watered the fertile ground of my interest and raised more and more questions about just how leaders understand, share, and carry out their instructional responsibilities along with just how extensive a role the literacy coaches play.

For the three years prior to this present study, each of the three middle schools had a full-time literacy coach on the faculty of the buildings. This coach’s responsibilities are varied, as all coaching jobs appear to be, but we received the general guidelines to spend approximately 60% of our time in coaching and professional development with teachers and 40% of our time as an interventionist if needed. At that time, an interventionist in Lakeside School District was
responsible for providing interventions for the students with the lowest local and state literacy assessment scores who may not be receiving additional support services from a Special Education or an ELL (English Language Learner) teacher; these students may or may not be in the RtI (Response to Intervention) process but have demonstrated a need for intervention based on triangulated assessment data that includes running records, a diagnostic spelling inventory, and a written response to reading. An interventionist provided targeted instruction in reading and writing at least two times per week that was in addition to the extra help the student received from the classroom language arts teacher. Coaches were expected to meet regularly with building administrators to keep them updated on our work and to receive guidance and suggestions for further coaching, but this varied among buildings from weekly meetings to monthly or even less frequently.

Coaching was provided to teachers at weekly subject area Professional Learning Community meetings (PLC) as well as individually at teachers’ requests. All coaching was done by teacher request at the middle school level; the coaching options included, but were not limited to, consultation, planning meetings, and/or during the 120 minute language arts/social studies block in a co-teaching or observation protocol. Each grade level (6-8) had three teams made up of two language arts/social studies teachers, a math and a science teacher. In addition, coaches also provided support to any other content area teachers, special education and bilingual/ELL specialists, and paraprofessionals, depending on interest and time. While coaching was initially focused on working with language arts/social studies teachers primarily, all three middle school coaches expanded their work to include content area coaching in science and math with some work in the fine arts, technology, and health classes as well. This change in coaching focus was directly related to what teachers are hearing about Common Core.
In essence, this ethnography is a bricolage of the various stories that unfolded from administrator interviews, coach focus groups, and analysis of literacy coach artifacts such as agendas, minutes, and surveys. A bricoleur forms a new creation from whatever materials are at hand, a patchwork quilt, as it were (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). It was my goal to create a quilt that will fully cover the questions of this study and create a better understanding of the next steps needed to continue the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the growth of literacy leadership in all key stakeholders in this school district.

**Research Questions**

The methodology detailed in this section was selected as the best way to answer the following questions:

1) How do middle school building administrators and literacy coaches understand and enact their own shared instructional leadership responsibilities in the process of implementing Common Core State Standards?

2) How has the introduction of literacy coaches contributed to the overall instructional leadership of these building administrators?

3) How has the district’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards influenced administrators’ and literacy coaches’ understanding of reading and writing instruction?

**The Big Picture: Using Ethnography to Answer Burning Questions**

In an investigation such as this, qualitative inquiry is necessary in order to allow the participants’ voices and interpretations be heard. Ethnography is my method of choice for many reasons, one of which is because of my personal involvement in this study. Understanding the phenomenon of instructional leadership in this school district has become a deep interest of mine.
over the course of my career, one in which I was actively involved in and struggling with every single day. Ethnography affords me both the opportunity to be actively involved in this project and provides a forum to help me create new knowledge, understandings and even relationships (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Traditionally, the goal of the anthropologist was to use ethnography to create a sense of familiarity with the strange (Van Maanen, 1988); in my case, I am taking on the job of making the familiar strange - or to create enough distance between the subject and me so that I can obtain a fresh perspective. Educational ethnography began to gain popularity in the 1970’s with the early work of Harry Wolcott who noted that sociologists blazed the path of interest into schools that was later followed by educational researchers and practitioners (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001).

And ethnography expands beyond the personal level: although Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw take the position that ethnography is “the inscription of participatory experience” (2011, p.11), this simple description is colorfully expanded by Van Maanen, who sees it as “the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of these others” (1988, p. ix). Thus, my choice of methodology is based on my active participation in the peculiar practice of building and sustaining literacy leadership in my former school district. Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma propose that educational ethnographic research requires “direct observation, it requires being immersed in the field situation…with the researcher as a major instrument of research” (2001, p. 188). As I will mention many times over, a participatory ethnography brings with it the constraints of using the personal voice and coloring the results with my own personal biases, but this is part of the journey. This has been my life, and more than that, it is the life of a school district made up of wonderful and frustrating
students, teachers, support staff, families and administrators for whom the answers to the questions asked in this study are vitally important.

**Zoom In on Participants**

Although it is evident that the educational leadership of a school district is informed and shaped by a multitude of stakeholders, for my purposes here, I will focus on those people who are directly responsible for middle school instruction and administration. Lakeside School District is a K-8 school district serving over 8,000 students in a suburb of a major Midwest city. Nine elementary schools feed into three middle schools, each serving approximately 1,000 students in grades 6 through 8. The middle schools are led by an administrative team of a principal and two assistant principals and employ one full-time literacy coach; from here on, these schools will be known as Northside, Midtown, and Southside\(^2\). See Table 1 on page 53 for comparative school demographics.

For this study, I consider the building level team of the three building administrators and a literacy coach to bear primary responsibility for school level instructional leadership along with participation and input from the teacher-led Professional Learning Community teams. Building level administration in turn is led by a district team which, at the time of this study, was headed by a superintendent and two assistant superintendents: one for curriculum and one for student services. In addition, there was a chief financial officer and a Director of Assessment and Accountability. They were supported by various mid-level managers and specialists. Lakeside School District’s instructional leadership team that shared responsibility for literacy instruction included, at the time of this study, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, the bilingual director, the intervention specialist/Reading Recovery teacher leader,

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\(^2\) Pseudonyms
and the two language arts curriculum specialists (one for grades K-3 and the other for 4-8) who also acted as district level coaches for the building-based literacy coaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Demographic Data for the Schools in This Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northside Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Reading % Meeting and Exceeding (under “old” cut scores)</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 Reading % Meeting and Exceeding (under “new” cut scores)</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 Reading % Meeting and Exceeding (under “new” cut scores)</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>1,054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL (English Language Learners) Population</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data obtained from the state Department of Education school report card site 6/9/14

The district superintendent, Dr. Vargas, was aware of the parameters of my study and gave me permission to interview administrators; in fact, he sent an email to all district administrators expressing his support of my dissertation work and encouraging them to meet
with me. I am pleased and honored to report that every administrator contacted was enthusiastic in his or her response to being interviewed.

This leads to the issue of my position in this research study as both the researcher and a participant as a middle school literacy coach. Any research protocol carries inherent issues of ethical responsibilities, but the weight of being both researcher and researched holds particularly heavy baggage (Emerson et al., 2011; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Van Maanen, 1988). Glesne and Peshkin offer a view that speaks to the heart of my position as a participant-researcher:

My subjectivity is the basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all that I do as researcher, from the selection of topic clear thought to the emphases I make in my writings. Seen as virtuous, subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than to exorcise. (1992, p. 104)

**Zoom Out to Data Collection Plan: The Stories of the Participants**

“The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1). This quote illustrates the basic simplicity of my data collection plan: I elicited stories from the participants about their experiences with and understandings of instructional leadership and how it relates to the Common Core Standards primarily through interviews as well as questions that probed for vignettes and experiences that illustrate the subjects’ experiences. Kvale and Brinkmann caution us, however, that this simplicity is “illusory” (p. 15) and that the interview is just the beginning of the journey toward uncovering their lived worlds and answering the burning questions of the
study. In addition to the stories that I sought, interviews also afforded a variety of other data including descriptions, lists, resources, questions and answers, facts, and chronicles (Riessman, 2003). Interviews and focus group sessions were audiotaped and then transcribed, and the transcriptions were the basis of my analysis of the data. These data offered contributions to the answers to these questions and solutions to the problem of how to enact shared instructional leadership that makes a difference for our students.

The following table describes the participants, their current position, their experience in teaching and administration, and their educational training and degrees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Role/ Pseudonym</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Mr. Rand, Principal</td>
<td>Northside MS</td>
<td>Substitute teacher for 1 year; Special Education paraprofessional for 2 years; taught science and PE for 4 years; assistant principal at a different middle school for 3 years; principal at current middle school for 17 years</td>
<td>AS Science; BS Science Education; MS Educational Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Mrs. Lane, Principal</td>
<td>Midtown MS</td>
<td>Taught middle school math for 13 years; assistant principal at the same middle school for 5 years; principal at the same middle school for 11 years</td>
<td>BA Math Education; Type 75 certification in Educational Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Mr. Marks, Principal</td>
<td>Southside MS</td>
<td>Taught 5th and 6th grades for 6 years; assistant principal of middle school for 3 years; principal of middle school 4 years</td>
<td>BA in Elementary Education with concentration in History; MEd in Education Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mrs. Jade, Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Northside MS</td>
<td>Taught 4th and 6th grades for 8 years; first year as MS assistant principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mr. Green, Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Northside MS</td>
<td>Taught middle school social studies for 8 years; elementary assistant principal for 13 years; middle school assistant principal for 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mrs. Adams, Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Midtown MS</td>
<td>Taught middle school language arts for 7 years; assistant principal at the same middle school for 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mr. Joel, Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Southside MS</td>
<td>Taught middle school social studies for six years; assistant principal at 2 different district middle schools for 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Missy, Literacy Coach</td>
<td>Midtown MS</td>
<td>Taught 3 years elementary special education; 3 years as middle school literacy coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Amanda, Literacy Coach</td>
<td>Southside MS</td>
<td>4 years of teaching middle school language arts and social studies; just beginning first year of middle school literacy coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ann, Literacy Coach and researcher</td>
<td>Northside MS</td>
<td>20 years of teaching elementary and middle school Special Education; 3 years as a middle school literacy coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11)</td>
<td>Dr. Vargas</td>
<td>District Superintendent</td>
<td>3 years teaching 4th grade; 2 years as assistant principal (elementary and middle school); 2 years elementary principal; 4 years middle school principal; 1 year as asst. superintendent; 3 years as superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12)</td>
<td>Mrs. Jeffries</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>15 years teaching grades 1-6; 4 ½ years curriculum specialist; ½ year assistant principal at elementary school; 5 years elementary principal; 1 year as asst. superintendent of curriculum, instruction, and assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13)</td>
<td>Mrs. Bales</td>
<td>Language Arts/Social Studies Curriculum Specialist, K-3, and District Literacy Coach</td>
<td>13 years teaching in the primary grades; 5 years Reading Recovery teacher; 6 years as LA curriculum specialist; 2 years as district coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14)</td>
<td>Mrs. Dress</td>
<td>Language Arts/Social Studies Curriculum Specialist, 4-8, and District Literacy Coach</td>
<td>11 years elementary teacher; 5 years Reading Recovery teacher; 11 years as LA curriculum specialist; 2 years as district coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As a teacher employed by this district during the time of this study, I recognize that these interviews with administrators placed me in a precarious position; as an ethnographer, I was immersed in this culture which offered me a unique insider perspective along with the difficulty of stepping back to take an objective view (Emerson et al., 2011). Kvale and Brinkmann warn that there is a “delicate balance between the interviewer’s concern for pursuing interesting knowledge and ethical respect for the integrity of the interview subject” (2009, p. 16). Let me be clear from the start: I have the utmost respect for the principals of the three middle schools and believe that I know each one fairly well. Each has his or her own strengths, and they all deal with a heavy load of responsibilities and problems. When I conducted administrator interviews recently for a different class assignment, one of the principals remarked that she felt she could be honest with me because she knew I wasn’t planning to “take anyone down.” This comment alludes to the importance and the sensitivity required dealing with this subject matter. These interviews were approached as both a knowledge-producing activity and a social practice (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As the researcher, it was important for me to take an empathetic interview stance that communicated a shared interest with the subject in answering research questions that will benefit the entire district (Fontana & Frey, 2008).

Three rounds of semi-structured interviews were scheduled to capture the changes in understanding of Common Core adoption and the concurrent instructional leadership responsibilities over the course of the first year of CCSS implementation in the district. Initially, I had planned to interview all 13 participants three times, but after the first round of interviews, I identified a small group who would most likely be attuned to the progress of the Common Core roll-out, and I asked them to participate in a mid-year interview. I interviewed all the participants again at the end of the school year. Tables 3 and 4 indicate the resulting interview schedule.
Table 3

*Interview Windows*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Round of Interviews</th>
<th>Second Round of Interviews</th>
<th>Third Round of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before the end of the first trimester of the 2012-13 school year (between October 1 and November 1, 2012)</td>
<td>Before the end of the second trimester of the 2012-13 school year (between January 14 and February 13, 2013)</td>
<td>Before the end of the school year (between May 1 and June 4, 2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Interview Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Round of Interviews</th>
<th>Second Round of Interviews</th>
<th>Third Round of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September/October 2012: All 13 participants</td>
<td>January/February 2013: 1) Amanda and Missy, fellow middle school literacy coaches 2) Language arts/social studies curriculum specialist/district literacy coach in charge of middle schools 3) Assistant principal, Midtown Middle School</td>
<td>May 2013: All 13 participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The guiding questions used to structure each administrator interview were based on the research study questions. General questions were devised and then revised in subsequent interviews based on the results of the earlier interviews. See Appendices A, B and C for the questions for the first and final rounds of interviews; the questions for Round 2 were a variation of the first round and were specific to the person or group I was interviewing.

All interviews were audiotaped and personally transcribed; a digital and a hard copy of these interviews are stored in my home.
As expected, the conversations that resulted from these informal interviews led to some unexpected places, and I found that we were, on some occasions, able to reach the level of a personal narrative story. According Riessman, “Attention to personal narratives in interviews opens discursive spaces for research subjects” (2003, p. 343). It is within these discursive spaces that I found some of the answers to my questions.

Subsequently, as a follow-up to these interviews, I contacted several of the participants by email in the fall of 2014 to ask for updates on where they were in the Common Core adoption at that time and whether they believed that our work in 2012-13 had any effect on subsequent efforts. The results of these emails are included in Chapter Five.

**Interviews for administrators.** The administrator participants in this study included both district level and building level personnel. The district administrators included those with responsibility for literacy instruction; at the building level, there is one principal and two assistant principals at each of the three middle schools. All the principals were interviewed for this study, but I chose to interview only those assistant principals in each middle school who are responsible for literacy instruction. I will refer to each administrator by both the pseudonym and the position (see Table 2 on pages 55-57).

**Focus groups for literacy coaches.** Each of the three middle schools has a literacy coach of which I was one at the time of this study; I will identify myself by speaking in the first person. The other two will be known as Missy and Amanda⁢ and are identified as literacy coaches in Chapters 4 and 5. I have chosen to refer to these two ladies by first names because they are such an important part in my professional research and also in my personal life as my friends.

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⁢ Pseudonyms
Focus groups have been used for at least 80 years as a practical and useful way to collect qualitative data (Krueger, 1994; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Doran, 2005). In addition to the interviews with building and district administrators, I invited the other two middle school coaches to join me in a focus group to discuss the work we shared in supporting both the district and building administrations in their efforts to improve instruction for all students. Focus groups are a useful way to encourage stakeholders to create shared understandings of experiences and even generate possible solutions (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2005). Although the size of this focus group is smaller than typically recommended, Krueger suggests that “mini” focus groups are helpful when the participants share specific knowledge and experiences even when the pool of information generated may be smaller (1994, p. 17). The literacy coach focus group met formally on three separate occasions, but we continued our discussion informally when we met at district meetings, in social gatherings and, on many occasions by email, when I sought to verify that the ideas captured from our discussions were accurate reflections of their input or I needed further clarification. All focus groups sessions were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher and pertinent emails have been saved for the researcher’s records. Our formal focus group sessions, lasting one to two hours each, were conducted at my home on the evenings of October 15, 2012, January 28, 2013, and May 2, 2013.

The focus group questions (Appendix A), similar to those from the administrator interviews, provided the format for the session, but topics also included pertinent projects and subjects from the District Literacy Coach Meeting Minutes from meetings occurring at the time of the focus group.

*Additional data to contribute to the big picture.* In their first year, all of the district literacy coaches met weekly for discussion, support, and professional development; since then,
they have met at least twice a month and the record of these meetings is found in the agendas and
minutes. From these sources, I determined the topics related to instructional leadership and
whether I thought they would help answer the study’s questions.

Additional artifacts include the agendas, minutes, and professional development materials
from the Common Core presentations offered during the 2012-13 school year.

The final piece of data is field notes of my own experiences and observations as well as
those from the other two middle school literacy coaches who were willing to contribute to this
study. Since we participated in the same or similar events in our jobs, I believe these accounts
afford both subtle as well as explicit representations. As the ethnographer, I recognized that
carefully recording my own thoughts, experiences, and responses to the events contributed to my
understanding of instructional leadership. In the final analysis in Chapter Five, these descriptions
are compared to other data and impressions of the participants. According to Emerson, Fretz and
Shaw, “because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different
descriptions of similar or even the same situations and events are both possible and valuable”
(2011, p. 5). I believe that these different lenses of import and meaning contribute to more
balanced and reliable answers to the research study questions.

**Zoom Out Even Further for Data Analysis: The Bigger Picture**

As mentioned above, the position I have taken as a researcher-participant is fraught with
pitfalls in addition to those mentioned relating to the data collection process. My attempts to
analyze the data in order to draw meaning from all the pieces of the puzzle and create a new
understanding about the nature of the creation and cultivation of instructional leadership afford
new concerns for ethical issues. The creation of meaning and new knowledge through reading
and reflecting on interview and focus group transcripts in this part of the research draws to mind
the work of Louise Rosenblatt who discusses these complexities as “an active process lived through the relationship between a reader and a text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 21). I proceed with the full knowledge that my personally derived meanings as the reader may differ from those of later readers whose “particular personality…at a particular time” (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. xvi) will result in another transaction and interpretation, and yet I believe that these constructed meanings will raise important issues and contribute to the overall understanding of the nature of instructional leadership in this school district as they continue on their journey toward adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Van Maanen provides me with another example of the text-reader transactions between reading ethnographies and interpreting their meaning when he considers the vital “role of the reader engaged in the active reconstruction of the tale” (1988, p. xi). Thus, there is a heavy responsibility for the writer of ethnography to the reader in portraying the subject in as clear and honest a way as possible in order for the reader to decide whether to agree with the writer or not.

When conducting interviews for the purpose of collecting the stories of the lived worlds of participants, the researcher is responsible for establishing a culture that is based on “naturally occurring conversation” (Riesmann, 2003, p. 331-2). In this discourse, then, stories and meaning can be co-created between the “teller and the listeners/questioners” (p. 333). These stories, descriptions, and lists that result from this interplay have been analyzed for comparisons of similarities and differences in categories including, but not limited to, themes and influences, attitudes and specific language related to instructional leadership knowledge and practices, and experiences that are evident in these life stories related to their professional practice. Wolcott describes this process as eerily similar to my metaphoric picture book, Zoom: “descriptive narratives can move in and out like zoom lenses” (1994, p. 16) as we traverse the topics both
large and small that will tie together the data needed to build an understanding of instructional leadership in this school district.

My method of coding interviews for analysis evolved over the course of this study. Each interview went through a series of analytic codings based on what I was learning as the year of data collection went on. Initially I looked for the broad themes that were related to my research questions and color-coded them accordingly: red for anything related to the district’s rollout of the Common Core, yellow for anything related to individual or shared leadership, and green for information related to the literacy coach’s role. After the first round of interviews and the early readings were completed, other interesting themes began to emerge that I wanted to explore, so new color-codes were adopted: blue for a participant’s discussion about his/her instructional responsibilities, purple for challenges to instructional leadership, orange for anything related to growing your own instructional leadership or learning about the Common Core, and grey highlighting for the issues that were endemic to middle school. After several rounds of this color coding, I began to take notes about where the interesting points and themes from each of the participant categories intersected and where they diverged, as well as important quotes. See Appendix D for an example of my note taking analysis.

Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007) have provided me with a framework for the leadership needed for implementation of a successful literacy program in their five action steps: Develop and Implement a Schoolwide Literacy Action Plan, Support Teachers to Improve Instruction, Use Data to Make Decisions about Literacy Teaching and Learning, and Allocate Resources to Support Literacy. With their suggestions, along with a synthesis of additional research in the field as described in Chapter Two, particularly the work on Systems Thinking by Peter Senge, I
have constructed a guide to assist my analysis of interviews and focus group transcriptions. This guide can be found in Appendix E, and the final analysis is included in Chapter Five.

Using clarifying follow-up interviews has also contributed to a deeper and more focused analysis as they were able to provide both the subjects and me the space and time to understand and interpret. Wolcott (1994) recommends that any researcher, particularly a novice as I am, takes her time to mull over both the questions and the answers to the important questions to allow the data (and the researcher) time to mature and develop in order to recognize the sometimes subtle interpretations that are hidden in the process.

My method of analysis can be considered a bricolage that will be appropriate for the interview and focus group transcriptions, field notes, and meeting agendas and minutes:

This eclectic form of generating meaning - through a multiplicity of ad hoc methods and conceptual approaches - is a common mode of interview analysis, contrasting with more systematic analytic modes and techniques. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 233)

These authors suggest that these “ad hoc” analysis techniques for the bricoleur include searching for patterns and themes, teasing out plausibility, grouping similar ideas together, comparing and contrasting, paying attention to relationships, and creating metaphors to achieve a more comprehensible whole. In the end, the goal is to build “a logical chain of evidence… and [create] conceptual/theoretical coherence” (p. 234). This would allow the opportunity for qualitative coding, either open coding, where the researcher does a close reading of data to identify any and all important and related themes and issues that arise, or focused coding, in which the purpose of this careful analysis is to identify predetermined themes and issues of the study (Emerson et al., 2011). In this case, I have utilized both methods in order to find answers to the research questions and uncover new dimensions and understandings about the constructs of the study and
then follow up with close comparisons of these tentative conclusions. Having the freedom to choose the technique that best fit the data allowed me to be sensitive to the varied and situational realities and stories of the participants of my study. These realities are important to keep in mind. While a great deal of the data of this study consists of interview and focus groups transcripts, Baker (2003) warns that ethnomethodology goes well beyond the traditional reading and analysis of interviews whose purpose is to uncover themes and content; ethnography demands that the researcher determine how interview participants interact with each other, how they build their shared and diverse knowledge, “how they negotiate identities, and how they characterize and connect the worlds they talk about” (p. 395). Baker’s interpretation of qualitative analysis can be compared to Harry Wolcott’s, who sees analysis and interpretation as separate extensions of thick description of your qualitative data; my analysis of the data contains “identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them” (1994, p. 12). The interpretation focuses on what this all means in the context of the study, or how the data addresses the research questions.

After completing over twenty hours of interviews and focus groups and countless hours of transcribing, reading, and analyzing this information, I believe I have only brushed the surface of what it means to conduct an in-depth interview of import. Certainly I revised and refined my interview style over the course of the year, but even near the end, I was still challenged to keep my interviewees focused on my questions because the subject matter was so painfully personal that the words in their minds and hearts just had to be said. Sifting through these words gave me headaches and heartaches, but in the end, the words yielded a story about commitment and effort on the road to adopting the Common Core State Standards.
Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

“Ann, your biases come through loud and clear in your proposal.”

~ Dissertation committee member

This comment, made at my proposal hearing, raised my anxiety about my ability to undertake this rigorous process. Aren’t researchers supposed to be impartial and open-minded? This thought brought me face to face with the frightening possibility that I had already reached my conclusions before I’d even begun my research. Let’s be honest from the start. I chose this subject area for my dissertation research because of the passion I’ve developed for it on a personal level: I see how my success or failure to effect positive change as a literacy coach hinges on the leadership capacity of both my building and the district. Zooming out to a broader view, I have been fascinated to observe changes in literacy leadership at both the building and the district level over the years and have been privy to inside machinations about the hopes and fears of these leaders. So I stand guilty as charged: I had very strong biases at the beginning of this research journey and was quite confident that I was going to learn that there is a vague and surface level understanding of literacy leadership in this district and that a closer inspection of our actions and history would prove that. Ah, but there is more to the big picture. What I’ve learned is that the issue is much more complicated than this. While our literacy coaches proved to be as knowledgeable and thoughtful as I expected, I found much deeper and more critical reflection on the part of our administrators concerning their own literacy leadership than I was expecting.
The purpose of this study is to examine the shared instructional leadership of middle school administrators and their literacy coaches as well as that of the district leaders, all of whom were responsible for the introduction and initial implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:

1) How do middle school building administrators and literacy coaches understand and enact their own shared instructional leadership responsibilities in the process of implementing Common Core State Standards?

2) How has the introduction of literacy coaches contributed to the overall instructional leadership of these building administrators?

3) How has the district’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards influenced administrators’ and literacy coaches’ understanding of reading and writing instruction?

In order to address those questions, I conducted three rounds of interviews with the participants over the course of the initial introduction of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts/Literacy during the 2012-13 school year. I transcribed all interviews, contacted the participants when clarification was needed, and then used the interview data as the basis to answer the questions. Additionally, I referred to meeting minutes from the Common Core rollout planning committee and literacy coach meetings. The CCSS presentation materials and agendas provided additional background information for this study.

In this chapter, I will attempt to summarize, analyze, and synthesize the results of many hours of interviews with my fellow participants in this study. First, I will describe Lakeside School District’s plan to provide their staff with professional development on the Common Core State Standards and to begin the implementation process. As this roll-out progressed, the
administrators and literacy coaches shared their opinions and concerns with me, and some are embedded in the story of that school year. In the subsequent section, I will include a summary of these interviews grouped by the three participant categories: district administrators, building administrators, and literacy coaches. Here is where I will explore the participants’ feelings about instructional leadership, both their own and also the leadership shared between administrators and literacy coaches, as well as a deeper examination of their opinions about the district Common Core initiative and how it impacts their understanding of literacy instruction and the potential impact on their schools. Following this, I will provide a synthesis of the interviews by exploring themes relevant to my research questions that emerged over the course of this study.

This story took place within the time frame of a school year. In 2012-2013, like many school districts across the country, we embarked on a plan to introduce and begin implementation of the Common Core State Standards. It was a year of learning and challenges that will, hopefully, lay a viable foundation as Lakeside School District continues to move forward to prepare our students for the 21st century world that awaits them.

**The Common Core Rollout in Lakeside School District**

During the summer prior to the 2012-13 school year, the assistant superintendent of curriculum, Mrs. Jeffries, created a committee to plan the roll-out of the Common Core State Standards. The committee consisted of this assistant superintendent, two language arts curriculum specialists, the district’s RtI (Response to Intervention) coordinator, the bilingual coordinator, a part time professional development coordinator, and one literacy coach; I was the coach who was invited to be a part of this group. The roll-out would be accomplished during the monthly Early Release days throughout the school year: once a month, students are dismissed about an hour and a half early which gives staff almost two hours of professional development
time including after school planning duty. Until this year, the schools could use this time at the principal’s discretion depending on the needs of the building. For this year, however, the superintendent, Dr. Vargas, had announced that the district would be providing mandated presentations on the Common Core State Standards at the Early Release meetings in order to ensure that every school was receiving the same message. It was left to the Common Core committee to plan these presentations. According to Dr. Vargas, district superintendent:

So we’re really trying to make sure everybody is in tune with how we’re going to do it, and what message…are we sending so that we’re all consistent with what we’re communicating. Because the last thing that I know you guys want to happen at the building is, “Wow, that building is here, and we’re over here,” as in, “They’re further along than we are.” So that’s what we’re doing. It’s slow and methodical. (Interview, October 10, 2012).

The planning committee met several times in late summer and at the beginning of the school year to lay out a plan for the seven Early Release presentations and to begin planning the initial roll-out scheduled for the end of September. Although all the committee members were committed to doing their part, most of us felt ill-prepared for the responsibility of providing professional development on something of which we all had so little knowledge. One of the district curriculum specialists, Mrs. Dress, stated this clearly during an early fall discussion. We were talking about her responsibilities as a member of the district Common Core planning committee and how teachers and administrators would be looking to her for answers about how this whole initiative was going to play out. At one point, I asked, “Are you comfortable being put in that position?” Her response was emphatic:
Not at all! Not at all! I have not been provided adequate training in that area; like, I’ve been asked to attend a few conferences. I’ve been given books, a LOT of books. But really? Is that how we’re going to learn best on what this is about? Have I learned a lot? Yes. Do I feel comfortable leading this? No. (Interview, October 9, 2012)

Even the assistant superintendent herself expressed her lack of confidence in leading this initiative:

Oh my gosh…I can just draw it back to the Common Core. It seems like everything is being given to us in bits and pieces, and…I don’t have a keen understanding of it myself. Coming into this role – as a principal, I felt well prepared, but to lead this whole charge (as assistant superintendent of curriculum)? I don’t feel that well prepared.” (Interview, October 25, 2012)

When committee members broached the subject of hiring outside consultants to guide and support us, the assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, shared that there was very little money available for this. We learned that the Regional Office of Education’s Intermediate Delivery Service was providing support to local districts at a reasonable price, so we invited a representative to present a proposal to us. After listening to her presentation, however, we agreed that we were able to provide our own professional development that would at least equal, and possibly surpass, what they were able to offer us. That gave us renewed motivation to seek out ideas from professional reading, professional contacts, the internet, and knowledgeable district personnel. The following is a synopsis of the Common Core roll-out plan for the 2012-13 school year.
Fall. For our initial presentations, the goal of the CCSS Planning Committee was to provide background on the creation of the standards, set a context for the current state of education as a way to show the needs for new standards, give a brief overview of the English Language Arts and the Math Standards, and then delve more deeply into the ELA Standards and their structure.

September. Our first presentation was a very basic introduction to the Common Core State Standards in PowerPoint format with talking points provided to the building administrators. We began by explaining the need for the standards based on ACT data and the increasing demand for higher education in local job opportunities as well as what College and Career Readiness means. After creating the context for the necessity of raising our standards, we shared the background, how they were developed, and who was involved in their construction. In order to illustrate the structure of the standards and provide a metaphor for “unpacking” or analyzing them, we had a volunteer in the audience unwrap a gift box containing all the grade-level iterations of Reading Standard 1. Additional volunteers came up and put them in order from grade K-12 to show the thoughtful progression of expectations. The four strands of the ELA standards and the Math Domains were briefly introduced before leaving teachers with the promise that we would make these changes thoughtfully, gradually, and together.

This PowerPoint presentation and talking points had been created by a teacher who was working part time in the curriculum department to provide professional development and to support the Common Core rollout; it was first approved by Mrs. Jeffries, the assistant superintendent of curriculum, and then Dr. Vargas, the superintendent, before it was shared with the coaches and the principals. The literacy coaches and building administrators viewed the presentation at separate meetings. Dr. Vargas made it very clear at these meetings that principals,
as the buildings’ instructional leaders, were to take primary responsibility for rolling out the Common Core through these monthly programs. “I’m very appreciative that the district took the time to think how we as a district wanted to do this,” Mrs. Lane, a principal, told me in the fall, “because I think it would have been very confusing had each building administrator worked with their own team on it….this helped us overlook our weaknesses…and look like we’re doing our job” (Interview, October 30, 2012).

These separate preparation meetings caused some feelings of frustration and disconnect for the coaches because we would have preferred to hear the same message and discuss the presentations with administrators early on in the process. Missy, a fellow middle school coach, mentioned that she would love to be “a fly on the wall in that administrative meeting when [the assistant superintendent] rolls the Common Core out…to the administrators and (see) what the reaction is there” (Interview, January 28, 2013).

Following the presentations, a debrief of how things went during the September program at a subsequent literacy coach meeting revealed varied opinions on the quality of the presentation depending on the principals’ literacy expertise and whether or not they followed the program as written. At my own school, the principal simply read the talking points, so while all the material was covered in an organized and thorough manner, the staff overwhelmingly reported in feedback that they were bored with the process (Exit Slip Questionnaires, September 26, 2012). Most other buildings had similar responses (District Literacy Coach Meeting Minutes, September 28, 2012).

The assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, who bears the primary responsibility for this roll-out, felt that this format worked very well for those principals who don’t have a lot of confidence in themselves as instructional leaders and still allowed for other principals with more
literacy experience to incorporate some of their own ideas (Interview, October 25, 2012). One assistant principal, Mr. Green, told me that he was relieved to see the district take the lead on a subject that was so vitally important and yet so nebulous at this early stage. He mentioned several times during an interview on October 17, 2012, that his job will be easier knowing all the buildings are on the same page: “Whenever you have multiple buildings, any kind of a rollout can look drastically different from place to place, so I appreciate them taking the lead with that.”

On the other hand, however, one of the building principals felt restricted by this top-down directive because it was contrary to what she was already doing in her building:

 Currently, I feel like I have no input. I get this PowerPoint…You must show it as it is….I’m like, “This isn’t going to work.” …I can see why this would be happening because some schools would be full-speed ahead and other schools wouldn’t even be moving in that direction yet…At some point, I want to rip my hair out because once your wheels start moving, you can’t be told, “Wait and stop and don’t do these things.” Yet I get it. You can’t have three middle schools in all different places. (Interview, October 30, 2012)

So the consistency that the district was pursuing received mixed reviews. “While I appreciate the need for everyone to be on the same page…, it takes the finesse out of leadership, and it takes the culture out of a building,” according to an assistant principal, Mrs. Adams (Interview, October 5, 2012).

October. Based on the feedback from the first presentation, the committee was determined to make the second presentation more interactive. A directive from the superintendent to continue to present in a PowerPoint format with talking points provided to the
principals created some limitations, but we included cooperative learning activities in this month’s program to allow staff to discuss, share, and move around during the presentation. The focus of this month’s presentation was on the six shifts required in instructional planning in order to effectively implement the CCSS. The presentation began with a table group activity where teachers were asked to sort Reading Standard 9 into its grade-level expectations. We suggested that they begin with the College and Career Readiness standard and work backwards in order to emphasize the backwards design of the CCSS. This was followed by a brief review of the September background information, and then a deeper exploration of each of the Six ELA/Literacy Instruction Shifts that teachers were expected to incorporate in the transition to Common Core teaching. These shifts were being touted at the time by www.engageny.org, a site that is developed and maintained by the New York State Education Department and was one of the early leaders in CCSS information and implementation. The shifts, which have since been combined and simplified, were to balance literary and informational text, build knowledge in the disciplines, staircase of text complexity, text-based answers, write from sources, and build academic vocabulary. As we explained each shift, we reminded teachers of the resources and current practices that we had in place in order to show them that our district had a strong foundation on which to build our Common Core instruction. This theme would be repeated in our presentations throughout the school year; it was vital that we reassure our teachers that much of our instruction was already meeting the rigors demanded by CCSS. The session finished up with a close reading of an informational article which was read in small groups with the purpose of determining the main argument and the author’s support for it. The teachers then used a “shift reflection” resource to discuss how each of the shifts was evidenced in the close reading.
In my follow-up interviews with building administrators, I heard conflicting opinions in the same conversation concerning the district’s plan at this early point in the year. These contradictions were evidence of uncertainty about how this new CCSS initiative would play itself out over the year and how it would impact each of the buildings themselves. Principals and assistant principals all mentioned appreciation for the district taking responsibility for this major educational enterprise, but most also worried that it would erode the buildings’ ability to tailor the plan to meet their own individual needs. For example, one principal, Mr. Marks, said, “…they wanted site-based leadership in the past, [and it is going to be] difficult when they want to rein it in with something like Common Core [where] there’s not much room for differences.” But in the next breath, he added, “I’m fine with that. I want to do what I’m supposed to be doing, so I really like what we’ve done so far” (Principal, interview, October 29, 2012). This time, my principal, by his own admission, did not spend as much time studying for the presentation and also felt that the interactive components were a waste of time, so he cut them out. Once again, the staff reacted with disappointment at the “sit and get” nature of the presentation. However, the more interactive format received better reviews from other buildings. “So far, the activities have been the best part,” another principal, Mrs. Lane, told me (Interview, October 30, 2012).

One of the other middle schools had the same experience as mine, while the third reported that the teachers were more engaged and seemed to enjoy this format, and that they were excited to try out some of the strategies in their classrooms. When the literacy coaches debriefed later, we found that the schools whose principals had included the activities gave positive feedback while the ones who didn’t, about 25% of the schools, were disappointed (District Literacy Coach Meeting Minutes, September 28, 2012). Similarly, the assistant
superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, was beginning to receive comments that these one-size-fits-all presentations were not meeting the diverse needs of teachers across the curriculum areas:

Now it’s getting a little more complicated because we have PE teachers and art teachers and health teachers and Special Ed. and OT, speech; we have every facet of education that we’re bringing together on these days… I’m constantly looking at…evaluations. Teachers are saying, “This is great. Thanks for taking it slowly and for bringing us along.” Then I read other ones: “Okay, we get it. We have the basics. When are we going to get down into how is this really going to impact the classroom?” (Interview, October 25, 2012).

It was becoming evident that, in a K-8 school district, the needs of the middle school teachers were very different than those of the elementary staffs. Teachers were becoming more vocal in their opinions about how the Common Core was being rolled out, and changes were going to have to be made in our presentations to differentiate among the varied teaching responsibilities. Based on feedback from our planning committee, the assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, invited both elementary and middle school building administrators to be part of the team, and in order to respond to the middle schools’ concerns, we also included another middle school coach who had expressed interest in giving her input.

November. Hoping that the third time would be the charm, some of our planning committee members mounted a campaign to have our assistant superintendent impress upon the principals the importance of following the Early Release programs as provided in order to increase staff engagement, and hopefully, their buy-in. With the new members of our planning team bringing their own expertise and opinions to the table, we created separate PowerPoints for elementary and middle schools. Additionally, we made a plan to offer a separate session for our
Encore teachers (art, music, language, PE, health, etc.) to better meet their needs for understanding how the content literacy standards impact their instruction. We were proud of our new strategy and hopeful that it would create more teacher engagement and buy-in, particularly at the middle school level.

Our plan for the majority of our teachers was to provide more in-depth coverage of all of the ELA standards this month (Reading, Writing, Language, Speaking and Listening, and Content Literacy). For this presentation, the teachers were given copies of the standards along with a scavenger hunt-type game that was intended to familiarize them with the layout. Although most of the schools reported that teachers liked this presentation, my school reacted with frustration, primarily because it was clear that the principal was unprepared and spent a lot of time reading the directions and complaining that they were confusing while teachers sat and watched (Exit Slips, November 28, 2012).

**Winter.** The goal of the CCSS Planning Committee for the winter of 2013 was to explore the Reading and the Speaking and Listening Standards in depth. There was no Early Release scheduled for March because of spring break.

**January.** As a member of the district committee, albeit one with the least clout, I felt a personal responsibility for the success of these programs, and I was discouraged at the response of teachers in my own building. While I wanted to honor the directive to allow the principals to act as instructional leaders, I also recognized that the principals with the classroom and literacy instruction backgrounds had a distinct advantage over those who had little or none of that experience. When the district committee put together the January presentation based on deepening our understanding of the reading standards, I knew my own principal would feel ill-equipped to lead this one because of his classroom instruction background in PE and science. I
approached the one assistant principal, Mrs. Jade, with recent classroom experience teaching sixth grade language arts and asked if she would be willing to work with me to support the principal in the next professional development. We approached him together with a plan to share the presentation with him expecting resistance, but he willingly turned the entire presentation over to us. Based on discussions we’d had, Amanda, the coach at Southside Middle, made a similar offer to assist her principal, Mr. Marks, and reported that she was able to “tag team” and “fill in the blanks [for teachers] a little bit” during the presentation. The third middle school is run by a female principal, Mrs. Lane, and female assistant, Mrs. Adams, with strong classroom experience who don’t need as much support in instructional leadership; their literacy coach, Missy, felt as if they didn’t need her help.

Once again, we provided a separate program for our Encore teachers. While literacy in the content area is a major focus of the Common Core State Standards, as mentioned above, the earlier presentations did not take into account the content area and other specialty teachers who were sitting in the middle school audiences. Although the art, music, health, and other specialty teachers in the elementary schools seemed satisfied with the earlier Common Core presentations, the middle school teachers were very vocal in their feelings that these were not geared to their needs. The district made two adjustments to meet these concerns: for this month, the specialty teachers were sent again to the district administration building to discuss their own content area needs (art, music, PE/health, foods, computer/technology, foreign language, etc.) Secondly, although all elementary teachers were to read the same fable for the close reading activity, we chose different articles for middle school teachers to offer a broader perspective that would appeal to science, social studies, and math teachers. Differentiating our professional development based on feedback and different building needs had now become the modus operandi for the
district Common Core planning committee, and we were feeling more confident and satisfied with our work ourselves, just as we were hoping for the teachers in the audience.

As it turned out, our careful study of the reading standards for literature, informational text, and the content area literacy was labeled a success by both middle and elementary schools alike (District Literacy Coach Meeting Minutes, February 22, 2013). The objective of this month’s presentation was to help teachers become more familiar with the ELA Reading Standards. We opened by exploring some of the resources on the State Department of Education website related to the Common Core, in particular, the monthly newsletter for teachers. The participants searched the standards for the important verbs and nouns that would define the core objectives, the middle school teachers did a close reading of a topical article about the current state of education in middle schools while the elementary schools read a myth, they used a Bloom’s taxonomy resource to create high-level questions for their reading, and they used these new skills to begin to create questions for an upcoming unit of study with their teams. Their assignment was to try this close reading and questioning activity out before next month’s Early Release and come prepared to discuss what they learned from it.

At the same time, additional study of the Common Core State Standards was taking place at the individual buildings. One of the middle school coaches reported that her principal, Mrs. Lane, had purchased Common Core Standards and Strategies Flipbooks (published by Mentoring Minds) although, “really, we’ve not utilized them at all” (Interview, January 28, 2013). At another middle school, the principal, Mr. Marks, purchased multiple copies of Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman and was conducting a book study for teachers; according to Amanda, the literacy coach, this study was a mixed success. Some teachers were very engaged and beginning to learn more
about the standards on their own, while others had not done the reading and had shown up to the book study unprepared. At my own school, I was concerned that, although there was a growing interest and enthusiasm among teachers during the presentations themselves, I did not see any carryover to daily instruction, planning or meetings between teachers and administrators. At Southside MS, Amanda felt that some of her more interested teachers were ready to begin some lesson plans based on the Core Standards but were being held back by both district and building administration who continued to advise caution and wanted to complete the rollout before moving ahead too quickly. Amanda reported that she would often pull the standards out during planning meetings to show teachers how they related to the current state standards they were using, and I used the standards for our Professional Learning Team meetings and common assessment calibrations.

So for the first time, based on the January presentation and the building initiatives, responsibility was now being released to all teachers in their learning of the CCSS, and many responded positively. One of the most resistant teachers in my building stopped me after the January session to say, “That was great. We needed that.” The other two middle schools reported a similar level of success. At the district level, we often joked with our assistant superintendent about her penchant for using the word “grapple” when referring to our work with the new Core Standards. It had become an inside joke for curriculum specialists and coaches. In an email exchange where we were sharing our thoughts on this month’s Early Release day, Mrs. Adams, an assistant principal in another building, wrote:

I found myself using the word “grapple” the other day. Shoot me. However, that is exactly what my teachers are doing. Slowly they are trying new things. They get so excited when they can share something new with their colleagues. Well, most of them do.
I think that’s the key: educate, give time, motivate, observe, and praise. Praise is especially good if you have some data to prove what is happening is working. I did not make this up; I think it’s in a book somewhere. Ha ha. (February 17, 2012)

And yet concerns persisted in some corners. As we coaches predicted early on and discussed throughout this school year, a grand initiative such as adoption of the Common Core State Standards could really challenge us all as literacy leaders. One of our literacy coach focus groups conversations summed this up:

Amanda: (I see) some (building administrators) who are stepping up…going above and beyond…learning, reading the books, talking the talk, getting into classrooms, and trying to change it. And others that aren’t.

Ann: So you’re starting to see…what’s the word…like a division. You’re starting to see different kinds of leadership, or lack of leadership, just based on the Common Core rollout. That kind of puts it (leadership) under a microscope.

Missy: Yeah, absolutely! (Interview, January 28, 2013)

The middle school coaches agreed during that same focus group that the district still did not have a cohesive plan for the exposition of the new Standards, describing the process as “piecemeal…not the big picture…fragmenting…bits and pieces…not cohesive” (Interview, January 28, 2013). There was also a growing concern that our monthly meetings were not enough to prepare us for the huge task of adopting the CCSS. According to Missy, we still hadn’t addressed “the question of where do we go next? I really feel like the once-a-month Early Release is not going to be enough” (Interview, January 28, 2013). And yet we were cautiously
optimistic: we felt as though we could finally feel some measure of satisfaction in our planning and implementation process. But as an assistant principal said, “We’re not ready for the test yet!”

February. Teachers, administrators, and other building staff are not the only stakeholders who must be informed about the new state standards. Early in this month, the district superintendent sent out a letter to district families and staff that detailed the increased rigors of the CCSS; this letter was also posted on the district website as suggested by the State Board of Education. In addition to providing some background on the standards and the new assessment system that would be accompanying it in two years, Dr. Vargas also warned parents and teachers that the state achievement cut scores were raised for the current year and that our district would see a substantial drop in the number of students who meet and exceed the standards when the test results were posted in a few months (See Table 1 on p. 53):

The State recently released information that compares [our] students’ 2012 ISAT scores to what is expected under the new performance levels. Currently, 89% of our students in grades 3-8 meet or exceed standards in reading and 94% meet or exceed in math. The State projects that 72% of our students would meet or exceed in reading and 74.5% in math under the new performance levels. (Email, February 12, 2013)

For this presentation, all teachers returned to their buildings to spend time grappling with the Speaking and Listening standards. The integration of these two language arts into all curricular areas is vital, so the committee decided that all teachers would receive the same presentation and then plan ways to incorporate the standards into their individual instruction.

Building on the success of January’s program, we included more teacher interaction. When teachers at my building were asked to share their experiences with trying higher level
questioning from last month’s CCSS program, there was animated and extended discussion going on all around the room. We highlighted the importance of rich speaking and listening instruction and experiences in laying the foundation for deeper thinking, reading, and writing. In a jigsaw activity, the teachers were asked to trace the development of one of the Speaking and Listening standards from kindergarten through twelfth grade in small groups and then share these progressions with a larger group. A 6th grade science teacher confided that, although she had groaned when this activity was introduced, she later found that it helped her to understand her place in the continuum of learning and how she can build on the instruction from the lower grades. During the presentation, we incorporated a number of well-researched speaking and listening strategies such as Turn and Talk, Stand and Deliver, and Numbered Heads. After teachers brainstormed the speaking and listening activities that they were already doing in their classrooms and placed them on worksheets with their grade-level CCSS standards, they were charged with the task of continuing to fill in the gaps to ensure that they would be offering many opportunities for students to achieve those standards over the course of the school year. Once again, we received mostly positive feedback from teachers in their exit slips, such as, “I’m excited to begin to see the Standards work coming together for me,” “It’s important that we increase our expectations of what our students can do,” and, “I know I have to raise the bar for all students and make sure more voices are being heard in my classes.”

And yet still most of the principals and coaches were hard-pressed to find any carryover of the Core Standards professional development in classroom instruction or during faculty or team meeting discussions. In fact, one of the coaches had this to say in an email discussing this problem: “We have not seen the transfer of teachers using the standards yet in our building. Still hoping after this next presentation there will be” (Email, February 19, 2013).
Spring. As the year drew to a close, we focused our attention on an in-depth look at the Writing Standards. This April presentation was going to be the last one to take place in front of the entire staff during Early Release professional development time. At the request of the teachers’ union, the May Early Release time was going to be given to them as planning time. Because of this loss of CCSS professional development time, the committee created a short presentation on the Language Standards that could be shared during weekly grade-level or content meetings by the principal with assistance from the literacy coach.

April. The next CCSS presentation took place in late April and focused on the writing standards. The team was feeling more confident because of the better reception they had received from the January and February programs; however, this also put pressure on us to continue to raise the quality of these CCSS professional development opportunities. We felt additional pressure knowing that this would be the final presentation of the year because teachers were going to be given the May Early Release time to work on end-of-the-year assessment data. According to Mrs. Jeffries, assistant superintendent, this was due to a contractual issue that guaranteed a minimum work time to all certified staff.

In our efforts to provide a more entertaining and engaging program during April, we enlisted the help of our district technology specialists who worked with two of the Common Core committee members in creating the presentation. The style for the Writing Standards was a bit more sophisticated than the previous PowerPoints, utilizing a Prezi format that afforded a more interactive and fluid visual appearance. Since our building administrators still needed background information on the standards, and we had received positive feedback from them on our earlier format, we again created talking points in order to provide support to building administrators and assure a consistent message across the district.
The agenda for the rollout of the Writing Standards included the Prezi which detailed the organization of the writing standards and reviewed the text types that the CCSS privilege: narrative, informational, and argumentative. Up until this time, both administrators and teachers had been using different language to describe writing modes, and we wanted to ensure that our language would be consistent across the district going forward. Our district was in the first year of adopting Ruth Culham’s Traits Writing program which used the term “persuasive” instead of “argumentative,” so the need for precise language was very important here. Next, we reviewed informational text structures to help teachers to understand that the organization of this kind of writing will be different than most narrative writing. Because of the importance of research in the CCSS Writing Standards, our building library media specialists had a part in this month’s presentation as they introduced teachers to the Big 6 Research process (http://big6.com/).

After the presentation, teachers broke into small groups to revise a piece of student writing to meet the middle school Writing Standards; this activity was based on a suggestion from Chapter Four in Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). The authors stress the importance of understanding the “rather elegant” learning progressions of the standards in order to set the appropriate grade-level expectations and to provide the level of instruction needed to reach those expectations (p. 119).

May. The CCSS planning committee had prepared a short presentation on the ELA Language standards that provided a general overview and included a short activity where we would read an excerpt from a Martin Luther King speech along with a passage from Pathways to the Common Core (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). The purpose of this activity was to illustrate how the CCSS language standards are not so much about conventions as they are about powerful language that the author uses to advance his or her purpose.
The principals were asked by the superintendent and the assistant superintendent to present this final part of the ELA standards at all of the PLC meetings during the month to conclude the rollout; literacy coaches were directed to assist their principals as needed. At my own building, this never happened due to the fact that other concerns were being addressed at these team meetings, so I sent the PowerPoint out to the staff and asked that they review it. Although I requested feedback and questions, I received very little.

When the coaches met late in the month, they reported that the short and simple presentation went well; my building was the only one that had not followed through on this one. This was confirmed in my conversation with a principal who was present at the district leadership meeting when they were asked to report on how the Language Standards presentations went (Interview, May 21, 2013).

By the time this month was coming to a close, most the participants in my study, who were hopefully a representative microcosm of the district staff, were singing a very different tune than they had in the fall about the rollout of the Common Core Standards. As I mentioned in the fall summaries above, participants had conflicting, and mostly negative, opinions about the district’s first pass at introducing the CCSS. Now, in late spring, the district administration, the Common Core planning committee, the building administrators, and lit coaches all deserved a share of the credit, particularly when it was clear that we learned from our early mistakes and made revisions and improvements as the year went on based on feedback from participants and observers alike.

In our final interview on May 15, 2013, the assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, expressed great pride in what we had accomplished over the rollout year, in particular that our presentations had improved as the year went on based on the feedback from participants. While
acknowledging that “it wasn’t an easy thing at all,” she believed that we had made a “really good start” at what instruction was going to look like and what the shifts meant to our instructional planning.

The middle school coaches agreed at their last focus group meeting that the rollout had gone pretty well despite their early misgivings; “I think it was a really big deal to tackle, and I think they did a really good job of it,” Missy said, as we reviewed the year’s work (Interview, May 2, 2013).

“I think…it went great,” reported Mrs. Jade, an assistant principal, “you know, the presentations were really solid. They were really well written. We presented them just fine. In fact, there were a couple that I thought were excellent, I think, from start to finish” (Interview, May 14, 2013).

Another assistant principal, Mr. Green, praised the rollout based on the positive reactions of his building’s staff:

I think it’s been meaningful, and I base this on the fact that the staff responded surprisingly well, especially recently with the activities that we’ve done. And I think that the staff’s recognized, as I feel I have, that it really isn’t something to be afraid of, and it makes sense. And there probably [are] a lot of things that you are already doing that, with some tweaking, will go along with it. (Interview, May 7, 2013)

And finally, Mrs. Lane, a middle school principal, summed up her own and her staff’s response to the entire year of presentations:

[In the beginning of the year,] I was thinking K-8? How is this really going to roll-out and be effective for all our teachers? And I think what I found is, due to the planning of
each of those early release days, and really specific planning and even some
changes…between elementary and middle schools…and us being able as a building to
put our own twist on things a little bit as well, I don’t think those could have been more
valuable. They were perfect! They were very educational. It was just the right level.
When you start to do something from 1:30, and you only have until 3:00 to really get into
something…you know, the feedback we got was phenomenal from our teachers. Even the
May presentations at PLC’s. They were very well received. (Interview, May 21, 2013)

**Zoom in on the Results of the Interviews**

The interviews of the district administrators, middle school building administrators, and
literacy coaches took place over the 2012-13 school year, and the interview plan changed over
the course of the study. As described in Chapter Three, I originally planned to interview all 13
study participants three times during the school year: early fall, mid-winter, and late spring. It
was my hope that each person would provide a unique perspective on his or her growing
understanding of the Common Core, the resulting changes in literacy instruction, and the
instructional leadership responsibilities that went with these changes. After the first round of
early fall interviews, I realized that some of the participants were clearly just beginning to
address these issues and were not spending a lot of time thinking about them outside our
interviews. After spending some time reflecting and worrying about this, I decided, with
counseling from my dissertation committee members, that I would choose key participants with
whom to touch base in January, and then save the remaining interviews with all the research
subjects for the end of the school year (See Table 3, page 59). I hoped that, with a year of
learning under our belts, we would all have more to say about shared leadership in the Common
Core roll-out in our district.
It was interesting to note that several of the interview subjects expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk to someone about their instructional leadership responsibilities and their concerns about the Common Core. I will address the issue of the lack of a safe forum for these conversations in Chapter Five, but I want to go on record here to express my respect for the honesty and depth of reflection of many of the interviewees. Three of the four assistant principals in my study made it a point to thank me for giving them ideas that they promised to reflect on in the future. “…I’m going to bed tonight and reflect on this, and what I didn’t say….You just made my day. Thank you for thinking of me [and including me in this study]” (Mrs. Adams, assistant principal, Email, December 10, 2012). “Thanks. I never get the time to think about these things – and that’s a shame because they’re important” (Mr. Green, assistant principal, interview, October 17, 2012). “Geez, this has given me a lot to think about. Can’t wait until we talk again!” (Mr. Joel, assistant principal, interview, October 31, 2012).

In order to lay the groundwork for the study of shared instructional leadership on the way to the Common Core in my school district, I wanted to ascertain the understandings of the participants about what instructional leadership means to them and how they support their own professional development in this area. Thus, my first interviews included several questions about this, such as how they would describe their roles and responsibilities as an instructional leader, the support for and challenges to building this leadership, and how they defined the literacy coaches’ part in sharing this leadership in the buildings. Over the course of the year, I attempted to craft additional interview questions that were related to my research questions (See Appendices A, B, and C). Questions 1 and 3 are centered on the influence of the district’s rollout of the Common Core State Standards:
1) How do middle school building administrators and literacy coaches understand and enact their own shared instructional leadership responsibilities in the process of implementing Common Core State Standards?

3) How has the district’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards influenced administrators’ and literacy coaches’ understanding of reading and writing instruction?

I was interested to learn more about how the participants defined their own instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges, as well as their perspective on shared leadership between administrators and coaches. These two are directly related to research question 2:

2) How has the introduction of literacy coaches contributed to the overall instructional leadership of these building administrators?

I wanted to understand how that process might have influenced their understanding of best literacy practice as well as their shared leadership experiences.

From the data I collected in my interviews, I chose the most pertinent related to my research questions. I created a note taking system to help me categorize the data and discover patterns and themes (See Appendix D for an example of my data collection notes.)

As a result, most of the interview data fall into three major categories: instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges, shared instructional leadership between the administrators and the coaches, and how the district’s introduction to the Common Core State Standards influenced that leadership and their understanding of literacy instruction. In the following section, I will share what each of the three participant groups had to say about these
three topics. Then I will discuss interesting themes that emerged within and across the interviews as a way of synthesizing what I learned from our discussions.

**Zoom in on the district administrators.** For the purpose of this study, the district administrators include the superintendent, Dr. Vargas, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and assessment, Mrs. Jeffries, and the two language arts/social studies curriculum specialists, Mrs. Bales and Mrs. Dress, who also act as the district coaches supporting the building literacy coaches.

**Instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges.** It came as no surprise to me that all four of the district administrators whom I interviewed agreed on the need for strong instructional leaders in all of the schools. After all, these people are all former classroom teachers themselves and understand the importance of the building leaders who are experts in curriculum and instruction. The questions that I posed about leadership responsibilities were to uncover their understanding of these in the face of a major initiative such as the Common Core.

They had similar definitions of their own instructional leadership responsibilities, and they all described themselves as comparable versions of an instructional leader of instructional leaders, or “I feel like I’m…really trying to instruct everybody, lead everybody” (Mrs. Jeffries, assistant superintendent, interview, October 25, 2012). All four described their responsibilities to lead and support the principals, teachers, and parents in their efforts to provide the best education possible to our students. Much of our discussion centered on the district’s responsibility to provide professional development to the building administrators in the areas of instruction and leadership, both directly impacted by the new Common Core Standards. While we all acknowledged that the bulk of the research on the new standards had been done by the Common Core committee and the literacy coaches, the district leadership was already planning ahead for
how to bring the principals and assistant principals along in their understanding of how to support teachers as they begin to incorporate the new standards into their instruction.

The superintendent and his assistant superintendent shared that they were making plans for future professional development for the building administration that was similar to what the literacy coaches had undertaken during the rollout year, including a book study and additional inservice on the new State Standards provided by experts from the State Department of Education (Interviews, April 30, 2013 and May 15, 2013). The superintendent acknowledged that the new expectations were going to be stressful for administrators who were also facing the burdens of high stakes testing and a new evaluation system for themselves and teachers:

I know teachers are feeling stressed, but so are administrators…if you look at all the pressures and requirements…that are mandated: RTI, Common Core…College and Career Readiness…it just – it never ends…But in the end, and I mean this respectfully, people have to decide: Do you want to do this? …This isn’t changing. We’re not going to go back. Not because of [me], but it’s not going to change – the accountability, the guaranteed curriculum – this is what the expectation is. The look at student results, the incorporation of a new evaluation. It’s not going backward. (Interview, April 30, 2013)

So in the face of all these increased expectations for our students and teachers from the CCSS, administration has to step up their own responsibilities to meet the challenges. District administration had plans for their building administrators, but “there is only so much we can do at the district level,” according to the superintendent (Interview, April 30, 2013). In the end, each building administrator must take responsibility to evaluate his or her own strengths and needs and develop his or her own professional learning plan in order to meet the new expectations.
Mrs. Bales, one of the district curriculum specialists, created an image of what it looks like to be an administrator who is also a lifelong learner:

…and I do believe all the administrators understand, to a point, the importance of that learning culture, that it’s ongoing forever, and it never ends. Whether they’re attending to it or not is a problem…and whether they believe deeply for themselves that the book needs to be on my nightstand, and on my desk, and it needs to be dog-eared with Post-it notes and I need to be talking about it with teachers – that, there, there are varying degrees of commitment to that in this district. How to get those kinds of engaged instructional leaders, you know, but I think it's about motivation, passion for what you're doing, hiring well, letting go of the dead weight that’s not part- that’s not engaging…The model’s not there, but I, I still have hope because I see lots of people who engage in spite of all that. (Interview, May 1, 2013)

Both the superintendent and the assistant superintendent echoed that need to build the instructional leadership capacity of the current building administrators and to hire new candidates with those skills already in place. They shared their plans to create a leadership academy for all prospective candidates both inside and outside the district from which they would choose potential administrators. They foresee a future with home grown leaders whose formation includes the specific expectations and skills needed in our district. The assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, made it clear she believed that these expectations need to start with the superintendent and trickle down when she said, “…we want to cultivate that type of administrator…[and] he (the superintendent) is starting by saying he needs them to be instructional leaders…If his name is attached to it, it raises the importance of it” (Interview, May 15, 2103).
The superintendent and assistant superintendent both described their unique accountability to the School Board, their Board committees, and the larger community, helping them to understand the complexities and impact of educational decisions. The curriculum specialists both described the responsibility of an instructional leader to build trust and relationships and ensure that all voices are heard. It is interesting to note that all four described the heavy responsibility they feel in leading the implementation of the Common Core State Standards despite feeling unequal to the task.

When it comes to building their own instructional leadership, three of the four district leaders listed reading and study as the number one way they learn more about and stay abreast of new initiatives in curriculum and instruction. The following is a compendium of their responses that shows their dedication to lifelong learning:

A lot of researching, a lot of reading…sometimes I watch webinars or go to conferences.
(Mrs. Jeffries, assistant superintendent of curriculum, interview, October 25, 2012)

Relying on the experts, all those really, really smart people – (Linda) Dorn and (Irene) Fountas and (Gay Su) Pinnell – I mean, they inspire me…they help us, they influence what we do. And you know, through my coursework at NLU (in the Comprehensive Literacy Model facilitator training), as much as I whined about it, I learned a lot. (Mrs. Dress, curriculum specialist, interview, October 9, 2012)

One of the first things I think about when I hear instructional leadership…is to stay current and to stay informed…by reading best practice journals, by making sure I’m attending conferences and visiting with colleagues in the field so I know what’s out there…so it’s not only staying current, but it’s knowing how to sift through that
information, and staying on task with what’s right and true and good for children. (Mrs. Bales, curriculum specialist, interview, September 24, 2012)

A second important influence on these leaders is their colleagues, whose professional expertise and support obviously inspire these instructional leaders to learn as much as they can and do their best in bringing this learning to bear on the needs of the children and teachers of the district. When asked about how he supports his own learning, the superintendent said that he relies heavily on his assistant superintendent of curriculum when he has questions about curriculum and instruction. This helps him when he interacts with School Board members and the community about these issues. The other three district administrators had even more to say about their own learning support systems.

I go to the … County Curriculum Council. And I have a lot of wonderful literacy coaches who love this kind of stuff and they’re always looking out and finding…that sort of thing…I trust the people who work for me, [I] depend on my (curriculum) team a lot…those people that gather the information, bring it back, and I learn from them as well. I like to learn from others as well as what I read or what I see [myself]. (Mrs. Jeffries, assistant superintendent, interview, October 25, 2012)

And it’s really the coaches that we work with…and the people in this [curriculum] department…that are so passionate about what they do…and they’re dedicated and they’re committed. I mean, how can you be amongst all of these people and not be inspired to want to do your best? (Mrs. Dress, curriculum specialist, interview, October 9, 2012)
I’ll do the easy one first…at least in our district, the literacy coaches were hired for their passion for best practices and their self-initiative in learning more about literacy. So it’s easy to be an instructional leader for them; often they’re instructional leaders for us.

(Mrs. Bales, curriculum specialist, interview, September 24, 2012)

And what do you suppose is the number one challenge to building their own instructional leadership? Time, the enemy of productivity and peace of mind. “There’s not enough time. You hear that from educators all the time – time is an issue” (Mrs. Jeffries, assistant superintendent, interview, October 25, 2012). This leader described an interesting conundrum: teachers complain that they don’t have enough time for planning and other classroom responsibilities, so the school district tries to carve out extra time for them. However, when that time is given to the teachers, it takes away from the professional development time the district needs to help teachers do a better job. It is an age-old issue for those of us both inside and outside the schools.

Closely related to time is the problem of having so many responsibilities or, as Mrs. Bales, one of the curriculum specialists described it, the challenge of trying to “keep those plates all spinning at the same time” (Interview, September 24, 2012). Our assistant superintendent sums up her job as being “very, very challenging, and…complex is probably a good word for it” (Interview, October 25, 2012). The other curriculum specialist, Mrs. Dress, bemoaned the fact that her job has gotten more complicated over time:

When I started this position seven years ago, it wasn’t nearly as fragmented as it is now. And I could make sense of all that. Now I feel like I’m pulled in so many different directions that I don’t feel I do any one job very well. (Interview, October 9, 2012)
Sharing leadership with literacy coaches. At the district level, there is strong support for the literacy coaches’ contribution to the overall instructional climate of both the buildings and the district. In the next section, I will explain how those same sentiments are found on the part of building administrators as well. There is no question that the adoption of the coaching initiative as part of the Comprehensive Literacy Model, in its fourth year when this study took place, was valued by all the administrators interviewed. There is strong evidence that all the building administrators and all the district administrators interviewed view the literacy coaches as vital members of the literacy leadership team.

The assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, described the work of the literacy coaches as invaluable in that most of them have a strong relationship with their principals and “really are there instructing the principals [in literacy matters] as they go.” One of the greatest benefits of having literacy coaches is that they have crafted a bridge or connection between the district and building levels and are responsible for better sharing of resources and learning among buildings. “They have…their finger on the pulse of the district. They know how the teachers are feeling and how the administrators are feeling” (Interview, October 25, 2012). She hastened to list her concerns for being careful about how the coaches are used in a building so that they are not overworked or given too many administrative, intervention, or clerical responsibilities that interfere with their coaching time and the broader impact this would have on the schools. The research on the varied responsibilities of literacy coaches supports these concerns.

Much of the research concerning literacy coaches in general, but middle and secondary coaches in particular, suggests that the broad range of responsibilities leads to fragmentation and even to a disconnect between coaching goals and practices and beliefs of teachers who consider
themselves to be content area specialists instead of literacy teachers (Smith, 2007). Because of this, the potential for effectiveness at this level is diminished.

Perhaps because the curriculum specialists, Mrs. Bales and Mrs. Dress, work so closely as the district ‘coaches of the coaches’ and are both part-time building coaches themselves, they had the most complimentary comments concerning the work of the coaches. Both specialists described the literacy coaches’ passion for learning and their seemingly endless energy in pursuit of more in quotes similar to this one: “I am constantly being sent articles by [you] and other literacy coaches, and I read all of them” (Interview, May 1, 2013). Additionally, they cited the importance of the work of the coaches at the district level in crafting curriculum decisions, choosing instructional materials, and in the case of the Common Core, reviewing presentations before they go out to the administrators and teachers. One had this to say about the coaches’ influence on her own work:

And it’s kept me from wanting to say, “This is too much, I can’t do it anymore,” because you're all doing it right alongside me, and I feel like we’re a team. And I want to be a part of a team like that, you know? Who wouldn’t want to be? You know, you can pile on the work, but yet, when the people around you are still running the race, you want to be a part of that too. You know, you don’t want to give up. (Interview, October 9, 2012)

Early in the year, the evidence for the influence of the literacy coaches in the roll-out of the Common Core was somewhat muted in my interviews with the district administrators other than the mention of them reviewing presentations and helping principals prepare for sharing this information with teachers, perhaps because the initiative was in the early stages. You will see later in this chapter that the literacy coaches themselves speak in depth about their work with both administrators and teachers on implementing the Common Core standards, but this was not
evident in the first interviews with administrators. By the end of the year, however, there was clear evidence that the administrators at both the district and the building level were cognizant of the literacy coaches’ contribution to instructional leadership in the rollout of the state’s Common Core Standards. Mrs. Jeffries, assistant superintendent, credited the rollout process with building the bonds between coaches and her as well as between coaches and their building administrators:

I think it (CCSS rollout) has strengthened the relationship between me and the coaches, and I think it has strengthened their own leadership because we use them as part of this process, too, because we ran it by them before we presented it to the principals. And I think it has even strengthened some of the relationships out there between coaches and their administrators in the building because they were instructed – they couldn’t just have the coaches do it. They had to do it themselves, so they came to rely on their coaches a little bit more, so I think it’s really strengthened and the principals have seen how much the coaches really do know. And I think it will only help in the future. (Interview, May 15, 2013)

Accompanying this burgeoning shared leadership among literacy coaches and administrators, however, were some concerns. In our district, just as in many others across the countries, the literacy coach’s job description included many varied responsibilities (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Mraz et al., 2008; Quatroche & Wepner, 2008; Sweeney, 2011). As the year came to a close, and we all engaged in reflection on what we’d learned, the district administration noted that it was important to continue to protect the coaches’ time so that it would be spent on those activities which would have the biggest impact on implementation of the new standards. One of the curriculum specialists, Mrs. Bales, brought this up as we discussed how to best build on our year of Common Core learning:
I just talked with our assistant superintendent about something I’ve called slippage between what administrators and literacy coaches are attending to now, and how I believe we need to revisit our purpose and make sure that we are impacting teachers and students directly. For example, … I do see that our literacy coaches are doing more and more assessing and clerical work and such as that, and slipping away from their number one job, which is to be having coaching cycles and to be working with teachers directly on best practice instruction. And that’s something that I have observed and only this week have had a talk with our assistant superintendent about, and I did suggest that we return to, um, some kind of activity with the administrators and the literacy coaches to work together and refocus or come to a consensus about what is our purpose and what’s going to be most impactful for children. (Interview, May 1, 2013)

The assistant superintendent agreed that this was an additional sticky issue where coaches were concerned and was mulling over the possibility of additional professional development for administrators and coaches on best practices for sharing leadership and utilizing the coaches’ time.

One thing that we have to do is we have to make sure our coaches are coaches. And not interventionists. We have to do a lot more with that. I know they’re to work with kids – at least one group of children. (Mrs. Jeffries, interview, May 15, 2013)

While the superintendent did not engage in much direct interaction with the district coaching teams, he received his information from the assistant superintendent. In my interviews with him, Dr. Vargas echoed this support for the coaches, but as you will read in the section on Common Core implementation below, he worried that principals may rely too heavily on the coaches in the area of literacy where they don’t feel as confident. He cautioned building
administrators regularly to remember that coaches are not in administrative positions and that the principals are the primary instructional leaders: “…the coaches aren’t administrators, and I think you guys get put in the middle sometimes. You know? I think you do” (Interview, April 30, 2013).

This same concern arose during my last interview with the assistant superintendent. Mrs. Jeffries described coaches being put in the middle as a “precarious situation” on May 15, 2013: “They’re quasi-administrators but they have no authority, power, no pay” and likened it to the curriculum specialists who are not administrators themselves, having “absolutely no authority but everybody comes to you for the answers.” Her answer to this problem was to explore the possibility of getting the leadership endorsement for the literacy coaches in the future. This same issue appears in much of the research on literacy coaching (Ippolito, 2010; Matsumura et al., 2009; Mraz et al., 2008).

**Common Core roll-out and a new understanding of literacy instruction.** My research questions 1 and 3 focus on the changes brought about by the first year of the Common Core adoption in this school district. Question 1 seeks to learn about the changes in shared instructional leadership between administrators and coaches, while Question 3 focuses on how the participants’ understanding of literacy instruction changed over the course of the year of professional development.

In both the first and final rounds of my interviews with the district administrators, there was a distinct difference of opinion between top level administrators and the curriculum specialists related to their opinions about the district’s rollout plan. Both the superintendent and his assistant superintendent believed that the district’s plan to introduce the standards was a good one and that it would give the building administrators a perfect opportunity to fulfill their
responsibilities as instructional leaders of their schools. The superintendent believed that “it is important now that principals are able to bring their staffs along.” In addition, he specifically warned them that the literacy coaches should not be in charge of the Common Core presentations: “I just basically told principals, ‘You can’t have your coaches leading this Common Core initiative. They’re not administrators. They’re there to coach and help but you have to be the ones out in front moving people along’” (Dr. Vargas, interview, October 10, 2012). The assistant superintendent felt that this format worked “great…very good” for the first two presentations, although she expressed her concerns that the entire year could not be simply overviews: “…we are going to have to do some hard work” (Mrs. Jeffries, interview, October 25, 2012). It was not surprising to hear that she felt she shouldered so much of the responsibility for the roll-out of CCSS at the same time that the superintendent was expressing his confidence in her knowledge and skills; when asked how he built his own instructional leadership, Dr. Vargas replied,

…having discussions with [her], to be frank…[she] is the one responsible for moving that initiative (the CCSS roll-out) forward. So you know, she and I talk regularly…so she wouldn’t be moving in a direction if I wasn’t in support of it (Interview, October 10, 2012).

At the same time that the upper district management were expressing their satisfaction with the initial roll-out of the Common Core State Standards, the district curriculum specialists were expressing their concerns. Both Mrs. Dress and Mrs. Bales recognized the importance of laying the foundation and building the background knowledge of all staff members but they questioned the ability of the principals to be able to carry this out. “Based on what I hear,” stated Mrs. Bales, the elementary specialist, “some principals are taking it more seriously and taking
more of a leadership role, where there are others that aren’t as confident with their understanding of the Common Core and are leaning a little bit harder on the coaches.” She admitted to being worried about the initial presentations and described them as “a little rocky still. I don’t think we’re real solid on how that’s being presented” (Interview, October 9, 2012). The middle school specialist, Mrs. Dress, was concerned that there wasn’t sufficient consensus early on among building administration, district administration, and the literacy coaches, a lack of agreement that “…this is the center of what we are doing. And I don’t believe we’ve done that…and I think we need to do some very deep thinking about how to make this central to our activities here” (Interview, September 24, 2012).

As the year drew to a close, their sentiments had not changed much. The superintendent and assistant superintendent continued to champion the Common Core rollout plan while the curriculum specialists refrained their concerns about the depth of the initial rollout presentation, the ability of some of the building administrators to sustain the initiative, and teacher acceptance and understanding of the need for change in instruction, but there was no doubt that the experience had influenced their understanding of literacy instruction. The publicized “shifts” of the Common Core State Standards were clearly changing the thinking and planning of the administrative leaders of Lakeside School District in terms of increasing rigor and expectations for students, improving content literacy instruction, and creating a professional learning infrastructure that would support all the staff in providing this instruction to our students.

Mrs. Jeffries, the assistant superintendent, provided an historical context for the need for the Common Core Standards when she was discussing the adoption of the reading and writing workshop model in the district; this is indicative of her growing understanding of literacy instruction based on her study of the CCSS. She described the move from whole class novels to
the workshop model as a good move, but one that may have inadvertently created a “mini-
elementary school approach” which ignored the needs of the adolescent reader with the focus on
book rooms, small group and level-driven instruction (Interview, May 15, 2013). Speaking
emphatically, she had this to say:

We are never going to meet the Common Core if we continue doing the same thing we’re
doing now. Never. We need to challenge those kids. They need to be reading above their
levels sometimes. Of course, the kids that are struggling need to have instruction to boost
their levels, but they can also learn from each other by doing book clubs and having those
shared reading opportunities and chances to talk with other kids and stuff like that. So
I’m excited that we’re trying to bring that back to the middle school teachers.

Literacy instruction across all content areas also was mentioned as a new focus for future
district work based on what had been learned from the CCSS rollout. This was often coupled
with discussion about increasing writing in all areas; the curriculum specialists and the assistant
superintendent individually mentioned the growing pains that the district was undergoing that
year because of the adoption of a new writing curriculum. However, they all agreed that this
would give teachers and students a framework for writing to learn across the content areas

One major district initiative that was growing out of the response to the new state
standards was the plan for thematic unit design. All of the administrators in the curriculum
department who took part in my interviews discussed their hopes and concerns for this initiative
in our final round of interviews. The assistant superintendent was very excited about her idea to
create grade-level teams of teachers and coaches to begin planning thematic units that would
integrate the language arts with a content area such as science or social studies. She saw this as a
gradual release of responsibility, a way to turn more of the responsibility for implementation of the standards over to teachers, a way to “bring them in,” and help them to make the standards their own. As we finished our discussion about this, she said ruefully, “So that’s kind of my idea. I don’t know if it’s going to work, but I’m going to try” (Interview, May 15, 2013).

Mrs. Bales and Mrs. Dress, the curriculum specialists, also discussed thematic unit planning, but they had reservations because they weren’t convinced that teachers had a deep enough understanding of the standards to begin the difficult work of curriculum design. In separate interviews, they stressed that there was much work to be done to better understand the standards themselves and the shifts that accompanied them. Additionally, they suggested that the focus first be on where our curriculum was already addressing the standards and where the gaps might be, and then creating curriculum to fill in the gaps. Here is an example of a concern that Mrs. Dress, the middle school curriculum specialist, shared:

Teachers don’t – they will have no idea how to implement this plan because they’ve only been giving small pieces of the puzzle. They’re not going to be able to put it all together and come up with this unit even if we give it to them. What kind of level are they going to be able to perform at? A very basic level because that's all they have. And is that their fault? I just think we’ve done a very poor job in preparing them for this stage in education, this next step. I feel like we should have come up with the big plan. I think we should have - we need more time with the teachers. This early release day - one and a half hours at best - what? Six times a year? And now we’re ready to go? NO. (Interview, May 1, 2013)
When I contacted several of the study participants a year later, they told me more about how that thematic unit planning went. I will share information about this in the section entitled, “Zoom in on One Year Later,” in Chapter Five.

**Conclusion.** District administrators appeared to have a full understanding of their own instructional leadership responsibilities, as well as their expectations for the building administrators. It was also clear that all of the district administrators understood that the instructional leadership capacity of building administrators varied. The work of the literacy coaches gained high praise among this group although they appeared to position the coaches more as a support for the principals rather than a partner in shared leadership.

Despite concerns, the district administrators were in agreement in their support for the new Common Core State Standards. The assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, told me that she was really excited about the initiative and, although they “are lofty…I also like so much about it. A lot of it makes sense to me” (Interview, May 15, 2013). Mrs. Bales, one of the curriculum specialists, believes that the CCSS provide a sense of clarity and “embrace mostly what good educators would say is best practice” (Interview, May 1, 2013); she compared them favorably to the most recent version of our state standards:

There were things in the previous [state] learning standards that, frankly, were not best practice: isolated skill development, discrete practice...not a focus on deeper meaning of text, not a focus on high expectations and writing. I feel like the Common Core is aligning with best practice research... so as a result I personally am more engaged. I also feel like...the Common Core State Standards and its promoters, and the people involved are putting it in front of us in a way that is giving it a sense of urgency, and it means something. It's real. When you say 'college and career readiness,' ...I think, yes, this is
what my husband’s company expects them to do. This is what I am expected to do when I adopt curriculum, make hard decisions, and collaborative decisions. It feels more real to me than the [former] standards. (Interview, May 1, 2013)

The new Core Standards were obviously causing ripples in the water at the district level as most of the key curriculum players developed and honed a new understanding of what it means to be college and career ready.

**Zoom in on the building administrators.** Although each of the three middle schools in Lakeside school district has three building administrators (a principal and two assistant principals), I decided that it wasn’t necessary to interview them all. I was interested in the principals’ perspectives as the leaders in their buildings, so I included all three although the results of the first round of interviews made me see that only one round of follow-up interviews, rather than the original two, would suffice. In my own building, Northside, I conducted interviews with all three building administrators; because of the close working relationship that I had with each and my vantage point as a daily observer of their leadership actions, I believed that our conversations would elicit interesting and relevant information for the study as well as another perspective on what I was observing myself. Each of the other two middle schools had one assistant who took more of a leadership position on middle school literacy education, attending meetings and conferences, working closely with the middle school literacy coaches on several projects, and showing an interest in learning more about adolescent literacy achievement. I felt that both of these people would have important observations to include in my study, although I conducted all three rounds of interviews with only one of these assistants based on what I learned in the initial round of interviews (See Tables 3 and 4, page 59).
**Instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges.** Our building administrators were all very reflective and honest about their own leadership responsibilities and described their multiple roles as a facilitator, a relationship building, a motivator, a servant leader, a learner, a teacher of teachers, an instructional leader; it was evident that these responsibilities lay heavy on their shoulders.

The newest building administrator at the time was a young woman, Mrs. Jade, who had just left the classroom after eight successful years as a classroom teacher to become an assistant principal in a middle school; she offered a view of the instructional leader from the fresh perspective of a novice. She described her instructional leadership responsibilities as similar to those of a teacher but with some added responsibilities. According to her, an administrator who is an instructional leader is still responsible for keeping abreast of best practices in instruction, learning about the district’s curriculum, understanding what implementation of the curriculum should look like in the classroom, and collaborating with others in doing so. Now as a building administrator, she is being held accountable for teachers’ and other staff members’ learning and implementation. As she compared the two perspectives, she ended with saying, “So I guess, you know, sort of similar, just the bigger umbrella (as an administrator)” (Interview, October 18, 2012).

Several of the administrators mentioned the importance of relationships and trust in instructional leadership. Fullan (2007b) refers to the longitudinal study conducted by Bryk and Schneider on “Trust in Schools” to show that the principal is centrally responsible for “developing and sustaining relational trust, which establishes the conditions for success” in the effectiveness of schools (p. 161). Another of our middle school assistant principals, Mrs. Adams, believes it is her job as an instructional leader to “make those personal connections and build
trust” in order to create an atmosphere where teachers are willing to share ideas and listen to those of others (Interview, October 5, 2012). Building a true, trusting relationship levels the field between administrators and teachers, according to one assistant principal, Mr. Joel. This means that you can feel safe enough to honestly discuss any concerns, and that teachers should be able to hold administrators responsible in the same way administrators do for teachers (Interview, October 31, 2012). A similar sentiment was expressed by Mrs. Adams, an assistant principal in a different building, when she discussed how she wanted the entire staff to know that “we are all on the same team;” instead of rolling out the CCSS and adopting a punitive attitude, her strategy was to enlist ideas from everyone and provide the support they needed to accomplish their own goals (Interview, May 17, 2013).

The difficulty of balancing management duties with instructional duties came up again and again in our conversations.

Well, for me personally since I’ve been an administrator in the schools for over 15 years, there’s been a dramatic change…in those days, instructional leadership was not about being an expert in every area that was being taught in your building. And I’ll admit that it was more about building management, and a big part of that when I began was about behavior management…I guess the way I viewed my role was I was helping the instructional side by keeping order in the school. (Mr. Green, assistant principal, interview, October 17, 2012)

…and if you would have asked me that question (about instructional leadership) 20 years ago when I started in administration, I probably wouldn’t have an answer…because 20 years ago, it was really based more on dealing with behavior and managing a building. And now that hasn’t gone away. We still have to manage the building and get the kids in and
out every day, we still have behavioral issues. (Mr. Rand, principal, interview, October 18, 2012)

Our new assistant principal, Mrs. Jade, was carefully expressing the difficulty of bridging the divide between these dual pressures:

I think the mindset…is more managerial than instructional…[and the expectation in this school is to focus on] that big picture, you know, less depth, more coverage of everything in the building, and I can see that logic there. There’s no part of the building that we can say, “Well, we’re not going to worry about that.” But it’s always something. You know, the sidewalk’s broken out front…the walls need painting or the bathrooms need fixing or the bus routes need changing or whatever. But I think it would be a mind shift to make instruction a big focus. (Interview, October 18, 2012)

“I’m always the go-to person for everything ‘cause I’ve got the management piece to take care of,” bemoaned Mr. Marks, a principal, who then went on to say that he handles the “instructional piece [by putting] the right people in place” (Interview, October 29, 2012).

The speakers in the last two quotes make the leap from those daily grudge duties directly to the need to make instruction the focus of their work, and this was not unusual whenever the topic of leadership came up in our many hours of conversations over that year. I mentioned in my introduction that I came into this study expecting little more than a cursory understanding of instructional leadership from building administrators based on my interactions with and observations of them. And although the interviews show ample evidence that they spend most of their time on management tasks, it is not from a lack of understanding of what they should be focusing on – perhaps even what many of them wish they were able to focus on.
There was no doubt that they were aware of the expectations of being the literacy leader in their schools, but most of the principals and assistant principals felt ill-prepared for the responsibility for several reasons. First of all, most of them had little to no instructional experience in this field. Of the seven building administrators in this study, three had language arts teaching experience, and one of those three readily admitted that things were different when he taught sixth grade.

The current superintendent, Dr. Vargas, had been in his position for three years at the time of this study and had made instructional leadership a priority under his tenure, although it should be mentioned that this was not new to the district. A discussion with the former assistant superintendent made it clear that principals had been discussing this since the late 1990’s (personal communication – retired assistant superintendent of curriculum). In the process of rolling out Common Core, the current superintendent had made it very clear that the principals were the instructional leaders of their schools and were responsible for leading the change to the new standards.

We know from Dr. [Vargas] (superintendent) that he expects administrators to be instructional leaders. And in theory, that’s awesome. And it’s what it should be, but in practice, we are going to need to have some major shifts in thinking – like retraining…Like if you’re taught a certain way – it’s the same way teachers sometimes have a hard time letting go of instruction because that’s what they were taught…was best. And we believed that then. And I think some work is going to have to be done at the building level to really shift that, because right now, [instructional leadership] is a second hand thought. It doesn’t have actual value or importance – a little bit but not enough to make it a priority. (Mrs. Jade, assistant principal, interview, May 14, 2013)
For some of these leaders, this shift was difficult. “I feel…there’s an unspoken expectation that I’m an expert in every area, and that weighs heavily on me because I’m not,” Mr. Green, an assistant principal, told me as he lowered his head and his voice (Interview, October 17, 2012). Another assistant, Mr. Joel, described the frustration he feels when teachers make it clear that he has little to offer them because he has never taught what they’re teaching (Interview, October 31, 2012).

But a solution to this problem was universal: rely on the experts who have the literacy experience that you’re lacking. When a building leadership team gained a new assistant principal fresh out of the language arts classroom, they rejoiced. “That’s why we need an administrator who knows what she’s talking about. And this year, that is what was so valuable…to have someone come alongside you who was just doing this in the classroom last year and say, ‘Change is difficult, but we can do this. We’re smart. We have Master’s degrees. And I’ll tell you how it can work’” (Mr. Green, assistant principal, interview, May 7, 2013). I heard from several of the participants that the key was to focus on strengths and divide and share the administrative responsibilities depending on who was best prepared to carry them out.

This was clearly evident in the female principal/assistant principal team at Midtown Middle School. Mrs. Lane, the principal, had an instructional background in math, and she relied heavily on the experience of her assistant, Mrs. Adams, a former language arts teacher, describing her as “expert” and “top-notch in that area,” and made it clear that she learned more about literacy instruction from her every day. Not only that, but she trusted her instincts and followed up on most of her suggestions for how to improve that instruction for all the students in the school (Interview, May 21, 2013)
Our administrators looked to other experts as well. Most of them spoke freely about reading books and articles about best practices in literacy instruction. Some attend conferences, and all rely on the curriculum department in the school district to point them in the right direction for whom to listen to and learn from. But the one constant in every interview with every administrator is that they all depend on their literacy coaches to lift their own learning and that of the teachers in their buildings, as we will see in the following section.

Another challenge to being an instructional leader that ran rampant throughout the administrator discussions is time, or more specifically, lack of it. Although I’m certain elementary school personnel would challenge this belief, our middle school leaders feel strongly that the responsibilities at this level are much greater. According to my data, some of the reasons for this is that there are more programs, more students (and, thus, more parents and teachers), more testing, more meetings, clubs, sports, and after-school activities, and that’s not all, according to one administrator who had worked previously in an elementary school:

You have very few crises [in an elementary school]…you have gobs and gobs of time to devote to reading something, researching something, thinking about something, meeting with your leadership team or teachers to talk about something, and I think that is, and this may sound petty, the number one villain for us at the middle level. (Interview, October 17, 2012)

Other middle school administrators also felt that they are spread thin and that all these varied demands on their time and attention dilute their ability to give instruction the full attention it deserves. An assistant principal, Mr. Joel, who describes time as his enemy says, “[For] myself personally, trying to raise a young family…I see other administrators in their buildings for hours on end. And I just don’t know how they do it…I need them to write a book and say how they do
“Even if we have the why and the who, we don’t have the when…It’s just the time consuming piece of everything,” concedes one principal, Mr. Marks. “You gotta juggle it. Whew!” (Interview, October 29, 2012).

We talked at length about the mind-numbing local, state, and federal changes in the field of education. The number of initiatives that we have seen over recent years can be considered as part of the challenge of not having enough time to do any one thing well, specifically to focus on instructional leadership. High stakes testing has placed great demands on administrations’ time along with the pressures of raising test scores, according to several of the administrators, particularly since student growth models have become part of their evaluation over the last several years. We would all agree that greater focus on improving instruction will place us in a good position to do well on any tests, but the reality is that high stakes testing may force schools into spending time and money on test preparation and logistics rather than on raising the bar in literacy instruction. Some of the additional demands that came up in our conversations include RTI (Response to Intervention), NCLB, Common Core, new leadership at the district level, new
curriculum adoptions, downsizing, IEPs and other Special Education requirements such as AIMSweb monitoring, MAP testing (Measures of Academic Progress), and new teacher evaluation models. All of these initiatives combined create the perfect storm that can impede an administrator’s focus on his or her own professional development.

Interestingly, it should be mentioned here that the complaints about lack of time were primarily made by the men in this group; their frustration with getting things done came up over and over in our meetings. The problem of not having enough time didn’t really surface in my interviews with the female principal, Mrs. Lane, or the two female assistant principals, Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Jade, even though we know that they are faced with the same demands and the same time crunch; two of the three women have young families, just as the men do. There were two instances when the lack of time came up for the ladies, but the context was quite different from what the men had to say. Mrs. Lane, the only female principal in the group, when asked what she would wish for if she could have anything, said that she would love to have time to read all the great books out there to bolster her professional learning. One of the female assistant principals, Mrs. Adams, complained several times that there isn’t enough time in the school day to meet the needs of the struggling students; her wish was to lengthen the school day or get those kids in before and after school to give them what they need. In my mind, the women in the group had a different take on the challenge of time than the men in this study.

One of the male assistant principals, Mr. Green, had two solutions to the problem of time: one is to take control of time and make it “sacred,” meaning that you set your priorities, create a schedule, and you stick to it without making excuses. His second suggestion was to build a “thinking room” where he can sit in a velvet jacket, perhaps while smoking a pipe, and think and think and think (Interview, October 17, 2012).
The final challenge that emerged with this subgroup of my participants was one that was unique to our building administrators. As early as my first interviews, I noted that many of them spoke of the desire to have a safe place to have candid discussions about many of the issues that came up in our conversations. In subsequent meetings, I asked them to explore that matter further, and they did so with honesty.

In reviewing my transcripts and notes, I realize that this issue came up in my very first interview in early October. While discussing the district’s plan to roll-out the Standards, Mrs. Adams, an assistant principal, raised this question:

...when you go to a meeting, do you want to sit as a listener at a meeting or do you want to be part of that decision making? Not a set-up decision making where you’re getting called in to be asked just to say you’re asked, but so that we’re genuinely all thought of as players in this game to help this community? (Interview, October 5, 2012)

Knowing that this woman had strong opinions, I did not recognize the weight of this concern until it started to pop up in discussions with other administrators. A couple of weeks later, the female principal, Mrs. Lane, described herself as the unofficial leader of the middle school administrators based on her tenure and personality, joking that the “guys” needed a woman to keep them in line. She went on to explain that she tried with varying degrees of success to schedule regular informal breakfast meetings with the other two middle school principals so they could discuss the “real issues” that weren’t on the agenda at the formal administrator meetings at the district level. Under the prior district administration, the middle school principals met weekly at the district office but had full control of their agenda and were often the only people at those meetings, so it was easier to talk frankly about the issues that they
themselves were concerned with. When the current superintendent and then the new assistant superintendent came on board, the meetings became more formalized, there were other people at the meetings, and the district administration created the agendas. “…[W]hich is fine,” Mrs. Lane explained, “and it’s not that what we do at [that] meeting isn’t important, but…”[it’s] probably more management than leadership…we’ve lost just a little bit of that.” She then went on to admit that their informal meetings, while in theory are important, are cancelled more often than not, due to their busy and conflicting schedules (Interview, October 30, 2012).

The need for this forum to discuss the issues amongst themselves came up in discussions with several other building administrators who also felt as if they would like to talk about concerns where they could be frank and have enough time to really solve some of them. One principal, Mr. Marks, had this to say when asked if he had a chance to discuss his ideas honestly at the administrative level: “So the answer is no, and some people aren’t open to new ideas either. And people are doing other things. We get along, but I see it as sometimes that I wouldn’t be heard” (Interview, October 29, 2012). Later in the year, he mentioned that he has tried to bring up some of these issues at meetings, but “sometimes we look at things differently, [so] that was difficult. And there’s one thing I’m going to say about that: ‘If you’re asking me to talk, then you gotta listen to what I say’” (Interview, May 2, 2013). Both he and another assistant principal complained that they didn’t always know what the other buildings were doing, so when you find out that something great is going on elsewhere, it makes you feel as though you’re not doing your job. This safe forum was described in an interview in late October:

[Where we could be] building a vision together and a safe place to say what you think. Even if what you want isn’t done in the end, you have to also be mature enough to say, “Ok, I’m not going to fold my tent and go home…I’m willing to get on board since this is
what the team decided.” [Where it would be safe to] agree or disagree [but they would still say,] “We still need you and we can’t do it without you.” I guess…building that trust. I feel like in areas where we need it the most, it’s very hard to get. And…I have no idea what to do about that. (Mr. Joel, assistant principal, October 31, 2012)

**Sharing leadership with literacy coaches.** In theory, as well as in these interviews, literacy coaches are seen as a vital member of both the district’s and the buildings’ leadership teams based on their historical interactions over the first three years of the coaching initiative in this district. While most of the administrators were unaware of the coaches’ part in the planning and rollout of the Common Core Standards early in the year of this study, by May of 2013, they had clearly developed a new respect for and understanding of what it means to share leadership with a literacy coach on an initiative as complex as the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. This conversation with Mr. Green, an assistant principal, about the coach’s role in the building was echoed in many of my interviews:

I think that…putting the literacy coaches in was obviously a purposeful plan to address the fact that the district recognized that people were in different places with their understanding of what the district was asking them to do, so I think that it was very important… So I think that’s been a hugely successful step, and I’m thankful that the district has made that commitment to our schools because I really don’t know that anything would have moved without you. So thank you for that. (Interview, October 17, 2012)

As mentioned earlier, all of the middle school administrators named their coach as one of the primary influences on their literacy learning. One of the principals, Mr. Rand, loves to repeat
the story of how he came to really understand the reading levels and needs of his struggling
students only after his school got a literacy coach. “Just in the last four years (since the advent of
the coaching initiative), I’ve learned who is falling through the cracks, and how we can assess
their needs and fix ‘em.” He attributes the decline in behavior issues at the school to a better
understanding of reading levels and getting the right books in every student’s hands as a result of
the improved assessment, instruction, and data analysis instituted by his coach: “No wonder they
were acting out. They were feeling frustrated. Now they feel more successful” (Interview,
October 18, 2012).

By the end of the year, most of the building administrators had developed an even greater
respect for their literacy coach as an instructional leader based on the work the coaches had done
at the district level in planning the CCSS rollout and at the building level in supporting the
initiative. I will address this transformation in more detail in the section on the results of the
literacy coach interviews below, but here is what one principal, Mr. Marks, had to say in our
interview on May 2, 2013: “I would just say kudos to the district and to the lit coaches for all the
work you did rolling it out slow…You lit coaches. Oh, my gosh. Once we hired you guys, the
support in the buildings is just tremendous.” Mrs. Jade, an assistant principal in another
building, credited the coaches with doing most of the work of the introduction of the new
standards and helping the building administrators by doing so:

I think that without the coaches’ role, we would have been in trouble because you guys
did a lot of the learning, a lot of the legwork. You know, by the time it got to me as an
administrator, it was already nicely in a packet, so really I didn’t have to do the research
involved. So you guys took this huge amount of information, you narrowed it down, you
put into presentation form, really lesson plan form, and then gave it to me. So really the
majority of the work was yours, and then we just sort of helped pass it along to the staff.

So I’d say overall, your role was pretty big. You guys really spent most of your year working on Common Core. (Interview, May 14, 2013)

In reality, however, there is another side to this story that showed tensions between administration and coaches. During the year that I conducted this study, the district was only in the fourth year of having literacy coaches and was still undergoing growing pains and adjustments at all levels.

While the coaches in two of the three middle schools in this study had a fair amount of success and acceptance, one of the buildings was just beginning to recover from a negative experience with their first literacy coach. Laura, who is not part of this 2012-13 research study, had been part of our first coaching team but had left at the end of the prior school year after three years of struggle. Her primary reason for leaving was because of a family move, but she had made it clear to all of us that she would not have returned to that position if she were to remain in the district. Because Laura had the most middle school teaching experience of all of the coaches, she was placed in the building that the district anticipated would offer the most resistance to the new literacy coach initiative. So while Southside Middle School now had a new literacy coach who was achieving some initial success during the year of my research, this background story bears relevance to the responses of our building administrators. While the district administrators were aware of the difficulties that Southside had with their first coach, these interviews made it clear that the experience had a greater impact on the literacy coach issue than any of us were expecting. The administrators from that building as well as the new assistant principal who was a former teacher in that building, all referenced the problems they had encountered and what they had learned from their initial experience with a coach.
From my discussions with other coaches in my own district and in others, this struggle for coach acceptance is not unusual, and it seems as if the literacy coaching movement at the secondary level poses additional challenges. McKenna and Walpole (2008) and others found that the organization of the middle school presents different challenges for a literacy coach compared to what is found in most elementary schools. Because there are many content area experts in middle school, in addition to the English/language arts teachers, there is often more resistance to literacy coaching because reading and writing traditionally have been seen as falling outside the purview of the science, math, music or physical education teacher (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Irvin et al., 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Sturtevant, 2003). This played out to different extents in the three middle schools of my study, but it bears mentioning in this context because the new literacy coach at Southside had a very different experience than her predecessor had.

**Common Core roll-out and a new understanding of literacy instruction.** Building administrators were in the early stages of a learning revolution based on the Common Core and the new expectations for instruction and student learning.

…As an assistant principal, I know the bare minimum about Common Core if I’m going on just what I’ve been taught through district and building functions and meetings… And as far as implementing goes, I don’t think we really are, and I think it’s because we haven’t unpacked it yet…so I say we are at the very, very…bottom of the mountain looking up…We have not even stopped for a break yet. We are just starting. (Mrs. Jade, assistant principal, interview, October 18, 2012)

This young woman, Mrs. Jade, in her first year as an assistant principal and fresh out of the language arts classroom, was one of the few administrators who expressed her lack of understanding so honestly. And yet she went on to say that, although she herself has a lot to learn
as a leader, she felt as though the district was doing a good job of approaching the roll-out in a slow and methodical fashion. She also expressed the need for caution in handing over the interpreting and implementation to teachers too quickly because “one of our biggest - and I don’t want to say fights – issues is teachers wanting to be able to teach what they want…So we know that could be a source of conflict” (Interview, October 18, 2012). Welcome to middle school!

While teacher demand for autonomy and independence is an issue at all levels of education, our middle school teachers are much more vocal about what they see as the district’s interference with their instruction than our elementary teachers are.

Perhaps the greatest influence that the year of CCSS rollout had on our middle school administrators was the growing understanding of the need for literacy instruction across content areas, and not just the most likely disciplines such as social studies and science, but also the electives such as Physical Education, Music, Art, and Food and Consumer Sciences. Many of them spoke thoughtfully about the shifts that the new standards would bring, including writing to learn, writing in response to text, and academic vocabulary, and they all seemed to understand that all this would be accomplished with an overall effort to do more reading and writing in every classroom. By May, all the building administrators were beginning to develop clear expectations about content literacy and to make plans to provide professional development in this to all their departments. They were listing things that they wanted to accomplish both before the new school year and then continue once the school year got underway: purchase higher level books and more content-related titles for their book room collections, create a plan with the literacy coach to work with the science and math departments, and spend more time in classrooms with the expectation that they will be seeing some of the activities that we had practiced and referenced in our Common Core presentations.
One of the principals, Mrs. Lane, had a more comprehensive outlook on literacy instruction across the curriculum when we discussed how the Common Core rollout had impacted her understanding that year.

…my perspective before - I knew we had to write in every content area, but I think it’s more about the whole picture of doing things now…when we talked about literacy instruction before, I was thinking, “Ok, our language arts instructors and our PLC’s.” And I knew everybody else had to write, but now we’re kind of looking at it from a student’s perspective, and what do they get over the course of the day? And how does the course of their day look from start to finish with literacy instruction through all of their content areas? That makes a big difference when you start to think about it from their perspective. (Interview, May 21, 2013)

So, just as I heard from the district administrators, she contrasted literacy instruction before- and literacy instruction after- Common Core, as did her assistant building administrator:

…for a very long time now, we have based a lot of our teaching on strategies and what kids need to know about strategies. What strategies? What strategies? And there was a disconnect between comprehension and strategies. I love, as I break apart the Common Core State Standards, that they’re looking at reading as though you’re a writer, which is incredible to me for that reading-writing reciprocity. (Mrs. Adams, interview, May 17, 2013)

As an administrator who also conducts intervention groups, this AP went on to say that not only will the new ELA standards impact her own instruction, but also what she will expect to see when she visits classrooms: “I’m not throwing strategies out...but I’m going to focus instruction
more on close reading, what exactly the author did, and craft/structure. I think the craft and structure piece is huge for that balance.” Clearly this woman, who had previously taught language arts at the middle school level, had a deeper understanding of literacy development before the advent of CCSS than did the other administrators who had never taught reading and writing. However, it was gratifying to hear that she, too, had gleaned new ideas for improved instruction from our year of learning.

The other middle school administrator with a language arts background, Mrs. Jade, was considering how the new standards would help her teachers to raise the bar on expectations for student work by using exemplars to inform teaching and create a shared understanding of college and career ready-work. We had spent the year working together with language arts PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) to help them develop a process for calibrating student writing based on rubrics from the newly adopted writing program, and she mentioned that this kind of work was laying the foundation for Common Core teaching.

That happened this year when we look back at our different benchmarks, and I was very pleased when teachers decided that they wanted start with that more advanced exemplar and work up to it. It makes more sense, and I do think that teachers overall are raising the benchmarks …because in the past, we’d be more apt to lower the bar to meet the students as opposed to teaching the students to meet the bar. So maybe that’s a change. (Interview, May 14, 2013)

Mr. Green, an assistant principal, made it clear that he did not consider himself a literacy expert and yet was growing in his understanding of what to expect from his teachers:
I think our sessions on the early release days and the activities have helped to give a certain life to what could be a very dry, clinical reading about Common Core Standards, so that has helped to bridge in my mind and helped me to see as an instructor, how would I keep my thoughts on weaving this into my instruction on a regular basis? So for me,…these sessions have really helped in this way. I think that if I was left on my own to read about it and help the staff understand, I think that would have been a stretch. And that would have been difficult because I’ve been out of the classroom a long time. And language arts was not my subject. However, we see that it applies to everything. So in social studies, you can definitely see how this fits. Speaking and listening, all the different aspects of all that go along with what we understand about social studies.

(Interview, May 7, 2013)

So while the year had started off somewhat rocky, the close of the school year brought a sense of optimism and fledgling confidence in carrying out the implementation of the new State Standards.

**Conclusion.** Although an understanding of the complexities of being an instructional leader was not fully developed in every building administrator, each one was aware of the importance of staying abreast of best literacy practice, spending time in the classrooms, utilizing student work and additional data to make instructional decisions, and supporting teachers to do the same. They all appeared to accept the more rigorous demands that the Common Core would bring with a solemn respect and a bit of trepidation. Literacy coaches were portrayed as vital partners in building the literacy culture of the building; it must be noted that as you read in the rollout story above, in some cases, this partnership was more in words than in actions. This problem was further corroborated in my discussions with the coaches themselves.
**Zoom in on the literacy coaches.** Finally, let’s turn our attention to what I learned in my interviews with the two other middle school coaches. Hollander lyrically describes research participants as “complex, often contradictory mosaics of history, experience, motivation, and interests” and suggests that focus groups “provide [a] window on these mosaics.” She provides me with the perfect way to describe the relationships in my coaching team and our work together when she says, “The participants in a focus group are not independent of each other, and the data collected from one participant cannot be considered separate from the social context in which it was collected” (2004, p. 631). Because of our interdependent relationship, I chose to interview Amanda and Missy in a focus group in which I was an active participant. These focus group interviews were not very different from the continual discussions I had with my two middle school literacy coaching “sisters” when we regularly met, either formally in our bi-monthly district coach meetings, or informally before or after school when the need dictated some additional support, a resource, or a shoulder to cry on. Even now, I listen to these audiotapes from our focus groups and am inspired anew by the intelligence, commitment, fortitude, and wit of these professional and committed ladies.

**Instructional leadership responsibilities and challenges.** What emerged from these more structured research interviews were themes that shared some of the same nuances with the building and district administrators, but also ones that were unique to the literacy coach’s perspective. Like the administrators, coaches touched often on the theme of instructional leadership and described what it meant for them, for their school, and for the district as a whole. They had a clear understanding of their roles as instructional leaders and gave many examples of their efforts to fulfill this role including modeling, obtaining and sharing resources, planning and leading both formal and informal professional development, giving feedback on both student and
teacher observations, helping teachers analyze and use assessment data, and more (Interviews, October 15, 2012, January 28, 2013, and May 2, 2013). However, it was clear that they struggled with the expectations that building and district administrators had for them because these expectations were often at odds with where the coaches felt they should be concentrating their efforts.

There were three challenges that were woven into the leadership theme that arose from coach interviews. Unlike the administrators, the literacy coaches spent a lot of time describing what literacy leadership is not, giving many examples of what a leader should not do, and expressing their frustration with the lack of shared leadership as a whole. The second was the refrain that literacy leadership in general, and the adoption of the new Core Standards specifically, would be much more effective if there were consistent communication and expectations from the top level of the district all the way down. And a final recurring challenge in our discussions was the coaches’ worry that the top-down approach of this current initiative was missing buy-in and commitment at the school level from both building administrators and teachers. These two final challenges parallel those heard from both the building administrators and the district curriculum specialists.

Here is how Missy, one of the coaches, describes her version of a literacy leader:

Obviously you know that my assistant administrator is knock-your-socks-off crazy about literacy, so…we’re on the same page. So it’s easy. I have full backing. I have full support…she really does a beautiful job of leading by example. And leading as …with a relationship and not a checklist. So last week, I watched her walk through different classrooms twice…she’s really good about providing positive feedback, and she has
really done a nice job in her leadership role which allows me to do a lot more in my role as well and has opened a lot more doors for me. (Interview, October 15, 2012)

Literacy coaches in this school district have clear and high expectations for themselves and their professional colleagues as leaders. Our work is difficult and vitally important, and there is no time to be wasted in our efforts to prepare each and every student with the tools they need for success in life. Missy, in the quote above, summed up many of the important characteristics of a literacy leader equipped for this job. Let’s dissect her description of her assistant principal, Mrs. Adams.

“…[K]nock-your-socks-off crazy about literacy” clearly means that a leader needs to have a passion for reading, writing, listening, and speaking across the curriculum. This is clearly evident in the large body of research about effective school administrators (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig, 2012; Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007; Spillane, 2006). It is analogous to the definition provided by a principal of an award-winning high school: “To be an instructional leader, you must be a person who eats and sleeps teaching and learning. Instructional leaders must constantly think about how to organize a school and instruction so all children can learn” (McEwan, 2002, p. 10). In order to be able to “lead by example,” you need to know what you’re talking about when you work with teachers, parents, administration, and students. It just so happens that this administrator does all of this because, in addition to her work with adults, she meets several times a week with her own intervention groups so that she doesn’t lose her connection to students or to the teachers’ work. This kind of commitment to literacy requires that you are a true learner yourself, in order to stay abreast of best practices in the field.
The coaches make it clear that leaders are learners as evidenced in our discussion on October 15, 2012. “Learning is a hobby for me,” said Missy when we were listing all the ways that we feed our need for knowing what’s best in instruction, continuing with, “I love to seek out information online now. Or I’m reading nonfiction like crazy…There are so many great things to read, and there’s so much amazing information out there for, like, Common Core or literacy and writing instruction. I just love to be moved and motivated by what I find online or…in a book.” She compared it to her love for gardening and expressed delight and respect for all of her coach teammates who spend so much of their spare time reading and researching new ideas to bring back to the coach meeting. The literacy coaches all agreed that they learn from each other, citing their coaching team members as the source and challenge for reading books and journals, searching the internet, attending conferences, following authors and experts on Facebook and Twitter, and then reflecting on and discussing what this learning means in our practice with students and teachers. At one point, Amanda expressed her surprise and pleasure as a new literacy coach, in becoming part of the district coaching team: “Coming into it new, it was just amazing to see the support and to hear the conversations – to see the intelligence in the group. That’s where the district leadership is – in that room every other Friday morning.” In addition to conducting our business of curriculum and instruction, these coach meetings were also a boiling cauldron of learning and professional development driven by both district leaders and the coaches themselves.

We agreed that we were in a unique position for professional learning because of the caliber of our coaching colleagues, the professional development opportunities afforded us by a district committed to best practices, and our proximity to a major Midwestern city where you could always find high quality universities, the best conferences, and literacy experts who make
their home there or visit often to share their knowledge. “That’s what a coach does,” Amanda stated emphatically when contrasting herself to some administrators and teachers who would come to their professional book study unprepared (Interview, May 2, 2014). Professional learning is privileged in the Leadership Standards for Middle and High School Coaches created by the International Reading Association in cooperation with the National Council of Teachers of English: “Literacy coaches stay current with professional literature and the latest research, examine best practices and curriculum materials, meet regularly with other coaches to build professional skills, and attend professional seminars, conventions, and other training… on… research-based literacy practices” (2006, p. 11). The research makes it clear that school leaders must be learners themselves if they want to foster the culture of learning among their staff and students (Barth, 1995; Bean & Dagan, 2011; DuFour & Marzano, 2010; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; International Reading Association, 2006; Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007; Taylor & Moxley, 2008).

The research connects this learner/leader’s role to that of an administrator, as well, because, in the words of Roland Barth: “The more crucial role of the principal is as head learner, engaging in the most important enterprise of the schoolhouse – experiencing, displaying, modeling, and celebrating what it is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will do” (1995, p. 80). While the district plan was to present the information about the Common Core rollout to the administrators and coaches separately, there was ample opportunity for them to work on it together at the building level. The district provided all the administrators and coaches with a copy of *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement* (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012), a comprehensive and accessible guide to understanding the English Language Arts Core Standards. The literacy coaches had many articles and websites that they were sharing
with each other and interested teachers. Shared learning situated in shared leadership will yield
deeper understanding of the issues, more confidence in leading and supporting teachers, and
“ultimately, positive action” that may lead to greater school improvement (Printy & Marks,
2006, p. 126). Amanda alluded to the fact that not all of the building administrators walk the
learning walk of an instructional leader: “My recommendation for more effective leadership is
the PD of the administrators. If you’re a building administrator, you should be on board and you
should know this stuff. And if you’re not…” Here, her voice trails off (Interview, May 2, 2014).
The irrevocable connection between shared leadership and learning is summed up beautifully by
Lambert: “It is what people learn and do together, rather than what any particular leader does
alone, that creates the fabric of the school” (2003, p. 20).

“I have full backing. I have full support,” (Missy, interview, October 15, 2012). This
theme recurred throughout our year of conversations; variations of this are a common thread of
literacy coach meetings, and it correlates to the coaches’ belief that vertical support for school
improvement is from the top down. Although it may seem self-serving, these literacy coaches see
a leader as a person who supports his or her teammates so that they can carry forward their part
of the school improvement agenda. In other words, they “open doors” for their coaches, teachers,
and colleagues of all stations, and they make a daily, conscious effort to build the leadership
capacity of all of these colleagues. Michael Fullan emphasizes this in Leading in a Culture of
Change: “Ultimately, your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective or
ineffective not by who you are as a leader but by what leadership you produce in others” (2007a,
p. 137).

Another example of instructional leadership responsibilities that came up lies in literacy
coach efforts to encourage and build leadership capacity in others. In our coach interviews, we
shared numerous examples of encouraging our teachers to step up and share what they know, speak out about what they believe is best for kids, and taking leadership roles at the team, school and district level. Missy described this kind of leadership as “hands on” in another conversation, and in her description of her AP above, she points out that the administrator was in the classrooms frequently. I would like to suggest that this is the administrator who will come prepared to a meeting having examined the data or done the research, sits down beside you, rolls up her sleeves, and struggles with you to solve your mutual problem. She is out and about in the school when she’s not tied down to administrative responsibilities in the office; she visits classrooms regularly, both in walk-throughs and extended observations, and knows what’s going on there.

This “hands on” approach to leadership does not simply apply to supporting your literacy coach and her work. It extends to providing the constant support and gentle pressure that holds everyone to the same high standards of fidelity to the school improvement initiative, in this case, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. If we are going to embark on this journey with hopes of success, then we have to find a way to hold every stakeholder responsible, and that means at the classroom level, the building level, and the district level. Fullan’s research offers dismal hope that major school improvement initiatives will be sustained after the initial rollout, detailing failure after failure of major projects. He cites several research studies indicating that, despite proper implementation, even good school initiatives will fail if the principal is not actively engaged in both the early stages and in setting high expectations for continuation (2007b, p. 101-103).

Our focus groups and my review of the district coaching artifacts including meeting agendas and minutes show that coaches are in the trenches doing whole group and one-on-one
professional development targeted to the needs of the teachers and administrators, teaching district classes on best practices in literacy, leading book studies at both the building and district level, modeling and co-teaching lessons in language arts and content area classrooms, and conducting Response to Intervention groups. Again, we turn to the IRA Leadership Standards for Literacy Coaches for our responsibilities: “Literacy coaches work with teachers individually, in collaborative teams, and/or with departments, providing practical support on a full range of reading, writing, and communication strategies” (International Reading Association, 2006, p. 11). Holding teachers and administrators responsible to carry out these initiatives is beyond the scope of the coach’s job description and falls firmly in the lap of administrators. According to a review of the literature on effective leadership, this is a vital factor in school improvement (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Murphy, 2004; Sweeney, 2011). Building administrators are responsible for fidelity to the implementation of the Core Standards at their schools, and district administrators must hold every building to the same implementation expectations.

Herein lies a theme that received much attention in our focus groups meetings: These middle school literacy coaches longed for more support from their administrators at both the building and district level to ensure that teachers were carrying over the learning and expectations from professional development and meetings into their daily instruction. As mentioned in both the building and the district administrators’ interviews, it is a very common thread: we all want the person above us, our supervisor with more perceived power than we have, to provide the backup we feel we need to do our job well. Is this the proverbial “passing the buck” to see it as someone else’s responsibility? Or is it a fact of literacy coaching? The research seems to indicate that. Matsumura et al. (2009) conducted a study of the principal’s role
in new literacy coaching and found that principals demonstrate their support for a coach and the coaching initiative through public validation of the coach’s role and her expertise in both public and more subtle ways. According to the authors, these public actions include participation in professional development and meetings associated with the coaching process. Over and over in my transcripts, coaches comment about their desire to have more follow up, carry over, hands-on help, follow through – often in terms of physical presence at meetings and in classrooms. “My administrator is good at sending emails,” or versions of this complaint came up in every focus meeting.

**Sharing leadership in the Common Core roll-out.** For the most part, we literacy coaches all agreed that the big CCSS initiative during the 2012-13 school year was a success in terms of building stronger shared leadership with our building administrators. There were, of course, some differences given the cultures of our schools, and at the end of this school year, two of us agreed that this year of learning had not really changed the way we shared leadership with our administrators; in fact, the rollout proceeded as we had anticipated. For Amanda, however, our newest literacy coach, there was a distinct difference in how her building administrators viewed the role of the coach at the beginning of the year and the end. We will go into more depth in this section on how this change occurred and its promise for the future of her school.

Missy coached in a school whose literacy leaders were clearly the female principal, Mrs. Lane, and her assistant principal, Mrs. Adams. This dynamic duo had just about perfected a tag team where each was able to use her talents to create a strong support for high expectations for all teachers. In such a milieu, Missy was embraced as an important part of the literacy team from the day she began working there four years earlier. As mentioned above, she felt that she had the full support of both these administrators, but these two ladies took the lead in all of the Common
Core presentations while Missy sat in the audience as a participant with the teachers: “And I’m ok with that…I think that I can let them lead that and be really happy about it…because I’ve got leaders!” (Interview, May 5, 2014). She felt that she had a good perspective from this vantage point for judging teacher response as “received pretty well”; teachers in her school were receptive and active participants in all the presentations.

However, Missy was much more than an audience member. As mentioned earlier, the coaches were instrumental in crafting the presentations and always did a practice run-through to work out the bugs and foresee any problems that might arise. Missy once spoke of how she was originally skeptical that these types of “canned” presentations would be effective, but she changed her mind over the course of the year:

[I saw] how it shifted and progressed, and how they recognized that they needed other people on that (CCSS planning) committee. I think it was a really big deal to tackle, and I think they did a really good job of it. I think I was… hesitant about how this is all going to play out because it always comes back to, “What about the middle schools?” But I think that it was really balanced. (Interview, May 2, 2014)

Additionally, this Midtown Middle School leadership team of Missy, her principal, and the assistant principal designed a plan to provide support and carry over from each of the monthly presentations. As part of the district PowerPoint, suggestions were given to teachers at the end of each presentation for lessons, activities, and strategies that they could use in the following month to try out the new standards. At Midtown, teachers were required to try one of these and bring back evidence of the work to the following meeting for discussion and sharing. Perhaps even more powerful was the school’s goal setting plan. Every teacher at that school, regardless of subject taught, had to incorporate student writing into their professional growth plan for the year.
So for example, the PE teachers had their students write an informational piece on a sport or a list of rules of a favorite game. Science teachers had their students write a reflective response to nonfiction articles about their subject matter. Among middle schools, this was the only one that had a plan to integrate the new learning about Common Core Standards into the regular curriculum. And the administrative team in this building was the only one at the middle school level who followed the superintendent’s directive to take the lead in the adoption of the standards.

As I mentioned earlier in the month-by-month rollout plan, my part in the CCSS learning initiative changed as the year went on. The principal in my building, Mr. Rand, handled the first three presentations entirely on his own based on the instructions from the district administration. He read the talking points verbatim and ran through the slides very quickly, skipping the discussion and the interactive activities. Teacher response was very dismal. I worked much more closely with the two assistant principals, Mrs. Jade and Mr. Green, than I did with the principal, so you could more accurately describe our relationship as shared leadership. We met regularly, discussed my work with teachers, devised plans to support them, coordinated the Response to Intervention program, and examined data together. It was to them that I turned with a plan to offer to help with the next presentations. To our surprise, the principal readily turned the entire initiative over to us. For the remainder of the year, the presentations went fairly well with mostly positive feedback from the teachers. The assistant principals and I divided up the responsibilities and presented the material together. The principal was an observer at most of the sessions, but he did not attend them all. I’m sorry to report that we had mixed success with follow through. While we encouraged teachers to try the activities from the presentations, and I modeled them in some classrooms, we only had a few teachers who actually incorporated them into their teaching. One
great example was Maggie, a 7th grade teacher, who revised all of her social studies unit plans to include comparison across visual, informational and literary texts based on our work together.

So for Missy and me, the leadership that we shared with our building administrators continued as it had been in the past. For Amanda, however, there were big changes in how she was perceived by both her administrators and the teachers over this year of learning.

It is important to remember that Amanda was a first year coach, a young woman with only four years of classroom teaching experience when she took on this new challenge during the first year of the Common Core State Standard rollout. Here is how she summed up the changes at the end of the 2012-13 school year:

I think that in the beginning…of the year, I was not involved with my administrator as much and towards the end, it became more of a shared, let’s talk about it, let’s do the work together. I don’t know if it’s more of a trust thing or if he recognized that I could do that, but…I think that throughout the year, he’s given me more leadership opportunities there. (Interview, May 2, 2014)

As she said, whether it was trust or recognition of her abilities, this team began to share leadership responsibilities in new and exciting ways. It should be mentioned here again that the previous literacy coach did not enjoy that kind of leadership in Amanda’s building during the four years she had been in that position. In one of our interviews, Amanda actually snapped her fingers to show how their presentations’ planning and execution was clicking along smoothly and efficiently. She reported that her principal, Mr. Marks, reached the point where “it wasn’t a struggle to, you know, him thinking that he had to do it all. He got to the point where he realized, ‘I need to let this part go’ …because he recognized his need for some help” (Interview, May 2,
This shared leadership was co-constructed based on their growing understanding of each other’s strengths and trust in each other’s abilities. According to Printy and Marks, “It is a dynamic, multidirectional, collective activity that takes place in and through relationship and webs of influence among individuals who have common interests and goals” (2006, p. 126). Mr. Marks, Amanda’s principal, had high praise for his new coach in our interviews, and when asked why this coaching relationship was different from the last, he attributed their “phenomenal” partnership to the fact that he had a say in hiring this new coach, whereby his first coach was assigned to the building by the district (Interview, October 29, 2012).

Along with this exciting development, though, came some new challenges for this new coach. As she accepted more and more responsibility as a literacy leader, some of the teachers in her building became somewhat resentful of this young, inexperienced coach. In some ways, the Common Core Standard adoption came to be seen as the “Amanda Show” or another “Amanda Initiative,” and she expressed her concern that she would be expected to support this work on her own without the needed support from administration or the cooperation of the teaching staff (Interview, May 2, 2014). This reflects back to the ongoing support that a coach needs from administrators so that their work is seen as directed, endorsed, and supported by the team.

There was also evidence that these coaches shared leadership with administration at the district level. They spoke often of their work on curriculum and the Common Core rollout at their district meetings as well as the support that is provided by the curriculum specialists and the assistant superintendent of curriculum in terms of professional development and resources. At the time of our final focus group, the coaches had been given a generous budget to build up the building book collections with texts that met the more rigorous requirements of the Common Core State Standards, in particular, more informational texts related to science and social studies.
content, especially STEM-related (science, technology, engineering and math), higher reading levels to meet the revised rigor expectations, and more multicultural topics and authors. Along with the compliments and appreciation came the recurring concerns that this district did not fully understand or support middle school, nor did they provide strong and consistent leadership to ensure that all schools and building administrators were held to the same standards.

Common Core roll-out and a new understanding of literacy instruction. There is no doubt that we had undergone a cataclysmic change in our coaching focus and responsibilities based on what we had learned thus far in our study of the Common Core State Standards. In fact, our last focus group meeting on May 2, 2013 consisted almost exclusively of discussion about this learning and how it would impact our professional practice moving forward.

Fresh out of the language arts classroom and a new literacy coach, Amanda’s perspective differed somewhat from Missy’s and mine, which tended toward cynical based on our experiences over the last three years. Amanda helped us to make the connection between the standards and the classroom when she described how what she’d learned about Common Core over the year would have changed her teaching. “So even my views about how I would have used that two hour block of language arts and social studies would be completely different now, you know, just based on what I’ve learned,” she stated, adding that her new understanding will make her a more effective coach (Interview, May 2, 2013).

We all expected our coaching work to look different in the following school year and had already made some changes during the year of the rollout because all three of us were working directly with Science teachers in their classrooms. In fact, we presented a session on content
area coaching at a national reading conference in March of 2013 and had gotten very positive feedback on it.

At the end of the 2012-13 school year, we all agreed that our language arts teachers were, for the most part, ready to take on the challenges of the new ELA standards, but our content area teachers were going to need more of our time and attention. Missy, when asked to gauge the readiness of her teachers to embrace the CCSS shifts, made the comparison to temperature: “I think that [the language arts teachers] are probably medium…but then the content area teachers are more medium rare because I don’t think they realize how much they’re going to have to shift their teaching” (Interview, May 2, 2013). In this same conversation, we played with the idea of seeing ourselves in the future as more of an instructional coach rather than a literacy coach because our responsibilities would reach well beyond the traditional reading and writing classrooms. Amanda credited the rollout with helping her to have “a little more confidence” to reach out in this way when she said, “I think I understand the Common Core better, and hearing it in multiple ways, going to the presentations, hearing our presentations multiple times, and reading about it, so I’m getting a handle on it” (Interview, January 28, 2013).

Further evidence of new understanding came from a discussion about helping students to do more close reading to understand the big picture, or main ideas and key details, as the standards label this. Missy mentioned that the idea of literacy across the content areas had changed her thinking, and “it has changed what I’m trying to do in language arts as well as science and social studies” (Interview, January 28, 2013). She went on to describe how she helped a science teacher develop questions about graphic representations in science texts that sought to develop an understanding of the author’s craft and structure, such as, “What did the author do well to get his or her point across?” and “What did the author do to grab your
In fact, we discussed the preponderance of silo instruction despite our district’s effort to integrate language arts and social studies into a single block. Amanda noted that some teachers were beginning to move away from the traditional practice of teaching reading, writing, and content separately and that the new standards would provide the backup we needed to ease more teachers into this new mindset. And how were we planning to do this? A renewed commitment to staff book studies was one idea, choosing professional books that are related to the Common Core or the kind of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking that the Core Standards would require. In addition to more work with the content teachers themselves, we agreed that we coaches would initiate a collaborative effort with the content specialists at the district level in order to marshal resources and support our teachers’ learning.

One of our district’s greatest resources is our book rooms which contain a wealth of text materials, both literary and informational; we made plans to add additional content related titles, in particular STEM-related topics (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), and more texts at higher reading levels since the majority of texts were originally purchased to support below level readers. We agreed to revisit some of our ideas for getting teachers to familiarize themselves with new book room titles and committed to using a greater variety of texts in our work with both students and teachers.

This led to another recommitment; after a year of spending a lot of time working on the Common Core rollout and doing direct intervention instruction, we all were looking forward to...
getting back to the tried and true basics of coaching: modeling, team teaching, observations, and the gradual release of responsibility that is needed to build teacher capacity (Interview, May 2, 2012). Both district and building administrators were aware that this was a necessary shift in our job responsibilities if a successful implementation of the new and higher standards would be accomplished (District curriculum specialist, interview, May 1, 2013; Principal, interview, May 3, 2013; Assistant superintendent, interview, May 15, 2013).

Based on our discussions with the district curriculum team, we knew that the CCSS standards would require curriculum alignment and design, and that we as coaches would lead a large part of that work. Amanda and Missy shared the work that their teachers were already doing on creating integrated thematic units based on some of the activities in our CCSS presentations. Although we were excited about the prospects of this kind of instruction, we worried about the difficulties of getting everyone on the same page, acquiring new materials, and changing the way things had been done in the past.

Throughout our conversations about how the Common Core impacted our own learning and practice, we returned over and over to the tremendous responsibility we felt to continue to build upon what the district had started this year. It was clear that we as coaches felt a personal responsibility for its success. Based on our earlier experiences with district initiatives, we feared that this one might lose its impetus and stall without strong support and pressure from the top administration. “That needs to be almost a top down type of [pressure]…it needs to be decided on by someone higher up. We have to come to some kind of agreement as a district about where we’re going with this,” Amanda said. We agreed that we needed a “culture shift that starts at the top, and everyone’s invested in. And everyone’s following up on [it]” (Interview, January 28, 2013). During our May focus group, Missy took up the same concern: “I think we need to stay
on it…I think [the district administration] stuck to their guns this time…I think that’s what needs to happen because it’s a shared learning across the district. We have to continue that” (Interview, May 2, 2014). Notice that our choice of pronoun was “we” in these discussions because it truly was a responsibility that we were sharing with others. Along with our commitment to continue the professional learning at our buildings came a hope that the district would continue their involvement and support across buildings.

**Conclusion.** There is no doubt that our literacy coaches were well aware of their instructional leadership responsibilities and had strong opinions on how administrators should carry their own responsibilities out as well. From the evidence in my interviews, my observations, and the feedback we received from both administration and staff, I believe that we carried these out to the best of our abilities. As mentioned several times in this study, a coach’s work is buffeted by winds over which she has little control, and the three of us struggled with the fact that these outside forces sometimes made our work less effective. We all agreed that our work would have more of a positive impact when our leadership was shared with administration.

For the first time as coaches, Amanda, Missy, and I felt as though the new standards and the district school improvement plan were well-integrated, which would help to “map out [our work] and make it clear” because “we’re doing things in different ways” (Interview, May 2, 2013); we were looking forward to it as the 2012-13 school year drew to a close.

**Zoom in on Common Themes**

In the results of interviews, I’ve discussed what I’ve learned from each of the individual participant groups. In addition to similarities within each group, there were similarities among the groups, too. Throughout the year of thinking, reading, writing, and listening to discussions of
shared leadership and the Common Core, some major themes bubbled up to the surface across the three groups of participants in this study, district and building level administrators, and literacy coaches. These common issues include time, trust, the need for consistency across schools in the district, and the needs that are peculiar to middle schools.

**Time.** It begins, almost invariably, as an apology: “I know you must hear this a lot…This may sound like an excuse…We have no control over this, but…Maybe I shouldn’t even say this…” It is where my interview tapes depict a pause and, in several cases, deep sighs. Administrators name the lack of time as their number one challenge to building and carrying out their own literacy instructional leadership. Even the superintendent brought up this problem when asked about challenges to building instructional leadership in his administrative team: “Time…I mean, they need to be in the buildings [versus coming to the district for professional development]…Time is a huge challenge [for principals]. Having enough time to make sure people are…doing what they’re supposed to be doing, are all on the same page” (Interview, October 10, 2012). The question here is whether time is an excuse or not. There is no question that today’s school administrators are facing boundless demands on their time with issues ranging from a broken furnace to the latest episode of a student disrespecting a teacher or a peer. And yet, as in so many of our concerns in education, this becomes a matter of priorities. If instruction is a priority, then you must make the time needed to educate yourself, get into classrooms, meet and talk with teachers about their own instruction, familiarize yourself with the student assessment data, and discuss these issues with your colleagues and others whom you trust and rely on for your own professional development.

This is illustrated by the following vignette that occurred at a middle school improvement meeting that was guided by the new Illinois School Improvement framework, Rising Star. The
committee, made up of representatives from each grade and content area as well as the principal and one assistant principal, was addressing the first Smart Plan indicators which happen to deal with the principal as the instructional leader of the school (Retrieved from http://iirc.niu.edu/IntegratedEPlans/SCIP/PlanningTools/Default.aspx?rcdts=440630470041005&year=2011):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IE06</th>
<th>The principal keeps a focus on instructional improvement and student learning outcomes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IE07</td>
<td>The principal monitors curriculum and classroom instruction regularly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While reading the research briefs which focused on the amount and use of time in the classroom by the principal, I felt anxious about the crucial conversation that would need to occur among the committee members to address our principal’s ability to meet these standards. It is common knowledge in my building that, although the administrators are very busy and can seldom be found in their offices, they rarely spend time in classrooms unless it is for a formal observation, to ask the teacher a question, or to talk to a student. Searching for the right words to begin this discussion, I was encouraged to hear the principal, Mr. Rand, begin by acknowledging that he knew he didn’t spend enough time in the classrooms. While some of the committee members quietly demurred, he went on to explain that, as recently as a few days ago, he had found himself with a free hour and decided to visit a few classrooms, but he was dismayed to find that nothing of import was going on: one class was watching a movie, another was in the computer lab, another was decorating posters for a social studies project. In other words, he was unable, in the short time he had available, to observe what he felt was evidence of quality instruction. I took a breath and ventured the opinion that, instead of relying on a found moment
for classroom visits, that he might consider scheduling this time first and then making it a priority to spend more time in classrooms to make it more likely that he would be able to observe the exciting things going on in them. This opened the way for a conversation among the committee members for ways for our three building administrators to find and honor the time to spend in classrooms observing, participating in, and even learning more about, the instruction that is occurring daily in our school. And although we continued to discuss this priority until the end of the school year, I did not observe any change in the amount of time spent in classrooms.

**Trust.** We all know that this is the basis of any relationship, and the importance of building a learning organization on a foundation of trust cannot be denied. In my discussion with Lakeside District administrators and literacy coaches, I found evidence of trust in their colleagues, but unfortunately, the lack of trust came up time and time again.

One of the district curriculum specialists, Mrs. Bales, reflected on her experience as a literacy coach who was building a relationship of shared leadership with her principal. She describes the hard work they both put into building a common vision for the building and a shared language that they would use with the staff.

[Our first year together was about] building a relationship and trust…through several…experiences together [where we] began to develop trust...through the planning, the talking, the collaborating…And I do feel like those very positive experiences had a great influence on me as an instructional leader but also on her, too. I think…there was a transaction there of growth and trust…that started us on the cycle of success. (Interview, September 24, 2012)
Several of the administrators positioned their literacy coach as the person in whom the teachers can place their trust, in contrast to how they may feel about their principal and assistant principal, because the coach is a colleague who is not in an evaluative position. It was clear from everyone in my study, from the superintendent on down, that they all felt it was important to respect and protect the position of the coach in this regard. One principal, Mrs. Lane, stressed how important it was for her staff to understand that “we’re all going to work together on this, but [the coach] is the person that they trust in the classroom” (Interview, October 30, 2012). That feeling was reciprocated when her literacy coach told me how much she trusted both her principal, Mrs. Lane, and her assistant principal, Mrs. Adams: “…they know…I have faith and trust in what they do as administrators” (Interview, May 2, 2013). Amanda, the new coach at Southside, spoke at length about the work she and her principal, Mr. Marks, had done together over their first year when she said, “I feel very trusted and that my opinion matters, and ‘What you say, we definitely want to do it, and we’re on board’” (Interview, May 2, 2013).

Over the course of several interviews, my new assistant principal, Mrs. Jade, repeated the honor she felt because our principal, Mr. Rand, and her more experienced AP partner, Mr. Green, both trusted her expertise in the classroom and were willing to listen to her thoughts on what was going on in classrooms and take suggestions about how to improve instruction. The assistant superintendent for curriculum, Mrs. Jeffries, stressed that her curriculum staff and the literacy coaches are the ones who support her and help her grow in her own learning, saying, “I trust the people who work for me…I think I depend on them a lot as my literacy leaders” (Interview, October 25, 2012). And while the superintendent himself did not use the word “trust,” Dr. Vargas often spoke of how his assistant superintendent for curriculum is the person he relies on when making his decisions about the right direction for the district and then
supporting those decisions in front of the School Board (Interviews, October 10, 2012, and April 30, 2013).

Peter Senge tells us that people who are motivated to build learning organizations are motivated on “both pragmatic and human terms” because a true learning organization “improves performance and creates the types of workplaces in which most of us would truly like to work” (2006, p. 273). He quotes the Singapore Police Commissioner who says that,

At the end of the day, it is the people who are the drivers of any organization transformation. Trust and focusing on how people in the organization relate to one another form the basis of our core theory of success. As the quality of relationships strengthens, the quality of thinking improves. (p. 280)

So while there was ample evidence that trust was earned and appreciated in the relationships among our participants, I also heard frustration and regret when trust was lacking. One of our assistant principals, Mr. Joel, is battling the lack of trust between his building administration and the teachers; he blames the many changes to which they’ve been subjected to over the past years as the culprit. These changes run the gamut from the national issue of Common Core, to state changes such as high stakes assessment pressures, district changes such as curriculum adoptions, building changes such as personnel, and even teacher level changes including room or building re-assignments. Teachers take these things very personally, he says:

So there’s fear on many levels. Fear does not beget trust, and so that’s a huge word that we’re struggling with here. To gain trust, you have to give it. It’s a tough thing to give, if you feel like you’re not getting it in return…You gotta give us that trust because otherwise we can’t build a partnership. (Interview, October 31, 2012)
Another building administrator would appear to agree when he talks about the challenges in the field of education today and says that teachers are carrying a heavy burden and getting beaten up in the media because it appears as if “teachers are no longer trusted to decide what’s best for kids” (Mr. Green, interview, May 7, 2013).

This issue of trust is directly related to the common complaint from building administrators about the lack of a safe place to discuss concerns and challenges in Lakeside School District. There are many issues at work in the lack of trust in schools or any other workplace, not the least of which is self-protection or lack of confidence in yourself and what you have to offer. A safe culture is one that must be cultivated from the top down and the bottom up, and it is no easy feat. One trend I noticed in this year of Common Core professional development and the district’s expectations for the building leaders is that those same leaders seemed to have more confidence in themselves and were exhibiting a cautious optimism in our final interviews that wasn’t there earlier in the year. We can only hope that this continues as they all work together to learn more about their responsibilities in educating the students in their care.

The need for consistency across the district. Even before I embarked on this study, I had heard the district superintendent mention his desire to create more consistent instruction and protocols across all the elementary and middle school buildings in this K-8 district. Dr. Vargas told us at a faculty meeting that he had worked in a large district that had site-based management and felt that it hurt rather than helped students and teachers. So it was no surprise when he directed the assistant superintendent of curriculum to create a Common Core implementation plan that would build consistent understanding and instruction in all schools. In early October, he spoke of the importance of sending a clear and consistent message that would result in all schools being on “the same page” where Common Core was concerned (Interview, October 10,
2012). In my interviews with Mrs. Jeffries, the assistant superintendent of curriculum, and in many of the meetings that I attended as a literacy coach or a CCSS Planning Committee member, she reminded us that the superintendent was adamant that everyone would proceed in adoption and implementation at the same rate. It was common knowledge that Midtown Middle School, under their female principal, Mrs. Lane, was moving ahead with unit and lesson planning related to the new standards and was even considering having a consultant come in to help them with the process. When the superintendent learned of this, Mrs. Lane was asked to put this work on hold until after the district’s rollout (Interview, October 30, 2012). Both she and her assistant, Mrs. Adams, expressed their disappointed in being held back when they felt their teachers were ready to move ahead, but they understood the importance of a unified and cohesive effort on the part of every school in the district. The other building principals in this study both mentioned that it was difficult when another school was perceived to be ahead of them. Even the coaches discussed their observations of the tremendous disparity among the buildings.

Amanda had this to say from her perspective as a coach at a school that was struggling to get their teachers on board with the changes that were being asked of us:

I would agree there’s a lack of consistency. It’s very site-based. For some buildings, that’s absolutely great because there’s instructional leadership in place that is fantastic and will get it through. And there are amazing teachers that will do whatever, that want to be there, because they have the support of their administrators, because they want to do what’s best. And in other buildings you lack that, so you’re not going to ever get to that position. (Interview, January 28, 2013)

Amanda and Missy agreed with me when I brought up the problem of inconsistent practice of good literacy instruction across the district (Interview, October 15, 2012). It had been
my experience that I would be asked to undertake a district mandate at my school that required a lot of time and effort only to learn that other schools had decided not to follow through on the same directive. Missy expressed her frustration about this, too, when she said, “I’ve seen and heard the inconsistencies and lack of leadership and lack of follow through in other buildings. I’ve been in meetings where one thing is said and another thing is done” (Interview, January 28, 2013).

The issue of inconsistency came up in the early days of the Common Core rollout. The superintendent and assistant superintendent were both expressing their satisfaction with the message that was being delivered while the district curriculum specialists and coaches still felt as though we had no real plan yet and were scrambling to build the ship after we had already set sail.

Another version of this inconsistency was in the lack of “follow through.” Coaches and building leaders alike complained about the many new initiatives and expectations that were introduced without the support or resources necessary to properly institute them at the building level. Both groups gave examples of new and burdensome assessment demands such as MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) and the varied district level common literacy assessments that are required without adequate support or training to properly integrate them into the building’s instructional plan. Once again, one of the coaches complained that “there are some buildings that are allowed to do things completely differently than other buildings,” which makes it very difficult to get teachers invested in the practice when they know that not all the buildings are doing the same (Interview, January 28, 2013).

The difficulty of creating and maintaining consistent oversight and support across a district this size is understandable. Each school has unique needs and strengths. However, the
district and building administration share the responsibility for ensuring that all major directives are adopted so that every student in Lakeside School District is receiving the same high quality educational experience.

**Middle school’s peculiar issues.** There is not one district level administrator who has middle school teaching experience; instead, they have all come from an elementary background. This lack of adolescent instruction perspective has certainly caused problems in the past, and once again raised its head in the early stages of the Common Core rollout when the middle school coaches and administrators began to complain that the presentations were geared toward elementary school teachers who taught all subjects. Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Adams, the administrative team at Midtown Middle School, were the first to raise the issue with the district administration who responded by adding more middle school representation to the CCSS Planning committee and differentiating planning for the subsequent presentations.

Because of the departmentalized content area instruction at the middle school level, the administrators and the coaches realized that the middle school literacy coaches would have a much different role in the future than the elementary coaches with the new secondary CCSS Content Literacy Standards. Secondary literacy instruction carries with it the unique needs of the adolescent learner as well as the complex professional development needs of content area teachers who may have little to no literacy instruction background (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Irvin et al., 2007; Ogle & Lang, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). As my research wound down in May of this school year, the assistant superintendent, all three middle school building administrators, and the middle school coaches themselves were making plans for more work with their content area teachers and recognized that this would pose unique challenges for this group based on their lack of experience with literacy instruction.
Conclusion

Despite the fact that my participants had varied positions, job responsibilities, education and training, and personalities, these interviews made it clear that we shared a deep and personal commitment to the students of Lakeside District. Everyone in this study was cognizant of the promise of shared leadership in undertaking such a daunting task as adopting the Common Core Standards, and it was clear that each and every one of us made a good faith effort toward that common goal. The district was in a good position to share the work because of the talent and expertise of the administrators and the strong foundation of the literacy coach initiative that had been cultivated over the prior three years.

That being said, these interviews uncovered tensions, frustrations, and missing pieces that need to be addressed if the district is going to be successful in improving instruction for all students. It was a year of great learning, but the real measure of success will be if Lakeside District is ready to face these issues and continue to build on the professional growth of that year. Chapter Five will provide further analysis of those issues and offer possible solutions.
Chapter Five

Summary of Findings and Discussion

With the research behind me and my findings staring up at me from the pages of transcripts, I can’t help but wonder if my research focus may have been misdirected. All through the last several years of narrowing my interests and developing my burning questions, I thought I was setting out in search of an effective community of literacy leaders. Instead, what I should have been looking for was a community of literacy learners: “a place where students, teachers, parents, and administrators share the opportunities and responsibilities for making decisions that affect all the occupants of the schoolhouse” (Barth, 1990, p. 9). As I explained in Chapter Four, I found that there was a basic understanding of shared leadership in Lakeside School District. There were instances of enacted shared leadership found in the three middle schools as they embarked on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. It was clear that learning had taken place for most of the participants over the school year in their plans to make changes in literacy instruction to better prepare students for college and career. However, what I found to be missing was a Systems Thinking perspective: a Shared Vision for a learning system that is necessary to make shared leadership and deep professional learning a consistent and sustainable part of the organization. Without this perspective and without the commitment to Team Learning and Personal Mastery among all the players any improvement that occurs will remain isolated rather than systemic. Here, in Chapter Five, I will discuss the implications of this.

My goal in this chapter is to pull all the pieces of this study together to form a cohesive contribution that will answer not only my questions, but perhaps those of other educational practitioners struggling with the same issues of how to create and sustain the shared instructional leadership that will make our schools a better place for all our of students. First of all, we will
revisit my conceptual framework that combines the structure of the Adolescent Literacy Improvement plan as a vehicle for school improvement (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007) with Systems Thinking as its foundation (Senge, 2006). This will provide the context by showing the resources that Lakeside School District has in place for effective school improvement as well as what might be missing in their efforts in providing college and career ready literacy instruction for all their middle school students. Next, I will address each of my research questions and provide a summary of the answers that arose during this study as well as their implications for what we have learned about shared leadership between administrators and literacy coaches. After this, I will discuss my recommendations and the limitations of this research project. In the end, as only seems fitting, we will revisit the district one year after this study was conducted for an update of where they are now and how some of the study participants are feeling about their progress.

Admittedly, shared leadership between the administrators and literacy coaches is a very personal issue for me since I had the privilege of planning and implementing the literacy coach initiative in this district from its early stages; as I’ve mentioned several times throughout this study, it is impossible for me to treat this topic in a truly objective manner because of my investment in it. So the reader is cautioned once again to keep this in mind as you consider my conclusions.

**Zoom in on the Conceptual Framework**

The Adolescent Literacy Improvement plan as conceptualized by Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, (2007) along with Systems Thinking (Senge, 2006) contain the fundamental building
blocks and framework needed for successful school improvement. In addition to showing us how
to do it, they also offer a yardstick against which to compare our progress toward the goal.

**Systems Thinking combined with a framework for adolescent literacy.** After all the
data has been transcribed and analyzed, we need a measuring tool to determine the effectiveness
of our district’s middle schools’ shared instructional leadership in the first year of Common Core
Standards implementation. To that end, I have chosen Irvin, Meltzer, and Duke’s framework for
instructional leadership to improve adolescent literacy (2007) as one way to identify the actions
necessary to improve the learning of middle school students. Their research shows that “a
systemic focus on improving students’ reading, writing and thinking skills can be a lever for
improving student achievement. If educators carry out this focus as a collaborative, schoolwide
literacy improvement effort, success is much more probable” (p. 220).

In addition to a framework for literacy achievement, my doctoral work has impressed on
me the need for systemic change within our educational system. For this framework, I turn to
Peter Senge’s theory of Systems Thinking (2006) which will provide further context for this
research study. I will embed discussion of Senge’s disciplines of Systems Thinking, Shared
Vision, Personal Mastery, Team Learning and Mental Models where apropos in the Action Steps
of an effective literacy plan as set forth by Irvin et al. (2007). For the purposes of data analysis, I
created a matrix (see Appendix E) that illustrates where the two theoretical models intersect and
overlap. Examples of the actions or characteristics that would demonstrate each of the
components of my framework have been included to help me analyze data and name the
important concepts that were exhibited or missing in a Literacy Instruction System. This matrix
is the basis of the following discussion.
Component 1: Implement a literacy plan. This school district’s curriculum administrators over two different regimes had been committed to implementing the Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy Model (CLM) for over ten years at the time of this study. The plan emphasizes the “dynamic, continuous relations between a school’s literacy program and the educational agencies and policies that influence school improvement” (Center for Literacy at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2014). There are ten features that focus on classroom literacy framework, school-embedded professional development, intervention programs for struggling learners, and accountability and research, all of which align with Irvin’s Literacy framework. The model has been the basis and the guide for all of the literacy instruction curriculum and professional development decisions across the district in that time period, and as mentioned earlier, the institution of the literacy coaches was directly related to the guidelines in the CLM, as was the requirement that every school utilize a Literacy Wall with the current assessment data for every student. The district’s Response to Intervention plan and the adopted interventions all came from the Model. In its essence, this is a true vision for literacy achievement for this school district. But is it shared?

The superintendent had been in his position for three years at the time of this study and had spent the year prior to that as an assistant to the former superintendent in order to familiarize himself with the district. Thus, he had exposure to the system that was already in place for literacy instruction in all of our schools. In my interviews, I heard the CLM referenced many times by the assistant superintendent of curriculum, the two district language arts specialists, and the literacy coaches. However, it was not mentioned once by the superintendent or any of the building administrators. The superintendent’s lack of understanding of, or commitment to, the importance of building on the foundation of the Comprehensive Literacy Model which was
already in place is evidence of a component breakdown in a system needed to sustain comprehensive school reform of any kind. Without the Shared Vision of a systemic instructional action plan from the superintendent down through all the other levels of administration, we will never be effective at the classroom level in improving the literacy achievement of all our students.

There was evidence that all the participants in my study had hope for the newly instituted School Improvement Plan, Rising Star (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012). Among the hopes for this plan shared in interviews were building more leadership capacity among the staff, increasing the amount of time administrators spent in classrooms, building a big picture mentality along with Common Core, and setting consistent expectations for all schools while allowing flexibility for individual needs (Interviews, October 29, 2012; May 7, 2013; May 17, 2013; May 21, 2013). However, while the Rising Star blueprint for school improvement provides descriptors of effective indicators of effective practices of high performing school and an ongoing self-assessment plan, it would more accurately be described as an action plan rather than a vision. A deeper understanding of the Comprehensive Literacy Model would have yielded opportunities to use the new Rising Star school improvement initiative to build on and strengthen those components which were already in place across the district. The power of a Shared Vision that is based on improving literacy for all students cannot be underestimated. This is supported by the research of Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007): “…a well-designed, thoughtfully implemented literacy action plan can serve as a lever for school reform” (p. 15). They further state that, “in schools that enact and sustain comprehensive and coordinated literacy programs, leaders at both the district and school levels play significant roles in leading for literacy improvement” (p. 16).
The lack of an overall district Shared Vision was raised as an issue by two building administrators. An assistant principal, Mr. Joel, was concerned that the district was missing the big picture and brought it up in an email just prior to the year of this study: “I also know that the vision I have in my head is not the same vision of ...people that I work with, and I can't help but wonder, ‘which of us has tunnel vision?’” (May 8, 2011). He continued with his need for building a Shared Vision when we met for our first interview in the fall:

I’m not detail oriented...but I’m good at seeing the big picture...I can see where I think we should be five years down the road, but I know this is way bigger than me....Every person you ask has a different thought on that... [We need to work on] building a vision together and having a safe place to say what you think. (Interview, October 31, 2012)

And Mrs. Adams, an assistant principal in another building, expressed her frustration with lack of vision in the Common Core rollout in our January interview:

The Common Core rollout from the district perspective has been disjointed, and I'm still struggling with what do we want to accomplish as a district about the Common Core standards of literacy by the end of the year? And I get frustrated when I go into a meeting expecting that there is a vision - the vision will be shared, and we’ll all end up collaborating on it. But how do we get to that point? Because we’re not there. (January 14, 2013)

Ippolito (2009) reminds us that communication is necessary for building principal and coach partnerships, and an important component of that is to create and discuss a Shared Vision for both literacy instruction and professional development. This is a small piece of the Shared Vision puzzle, and not only was this missing on the coach-principal level, but there was no real
plan to foster enrollment and commitment to a vision among any of the other stakeholders in this school improvement project.

So creating and nurturing this Shared Vision is a responsibility of all the stakeholders, but it has to start with the district administration, and it must bear the collective input from everyone. There is a mission statement that hangs in the entryway of every school in the district; this goal statement was created in the mid-1990’s by an ad hoc group made up of administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders from government, businesses, and the ministerium: “Educational excellence for all students is our passion and commitment.” A recent search of the district website, however, yields a vision plan for the technology department but no other. A Shared Vision would marshal the efforts of all the members of the organization and ensure the focus and commitment to the literacy plan that bears promise to prepare all of our students for college and career readiness. “When people truly share a vision they are connected, bound together by common aspiration…and their desire to be connected in an important undertaking,” according to Senge (2006, p. 192).

Fullan’s research points out that “schools in which teachers have a shared consensus about the goals and organization of their work are more likely to incorporate new ideas directed to student learning” (2007b, p. 38). He then goes on to propose that this work will not achieve our common goals unless it is connected to moral purpose and quotes Oakes (1999) in saying, “But unless they were bound together by a moral commitment to growth, empathy, and shared responsibility, teachers were as likely to replicate the prevailing school cultures as to change it” (p. 38). This shared moral imperative must be highlighted in all of our planning and implementation efforts: in our hearts, almost every single person is committed to providing a
better future for all of our students. Now it must become the major driving force in all of our
decisions about school improvement.

**Component 2: Support teachers to improve instruction.** One of the primary ways this is
done is by building relationships; this came up in the literacy coach focus groups and in the
interviews with some of the building administrators. Missy described her assistant principal at
Midtown, Mrs. Adams, as an instructional leader who knows how to lead “with the relationship
and not a checklist” (Interview, October 15, 2012). Midtown’s principal, Mrs. Lane, and
assistant principal, Mrs. Adams, both spoke at length about their efforts to create a culture of
trust and mutual respect with their teachers as a way to elicit their best efforts in return. They
described their plan to bring a homey atmosphere to the teacher lounge by adding a fancy coffee
machine and comfortable chairs, providing treats and surprises on occasion, offering to take over
a class from time to time to give the teacher a break, and allowing them to come in a little late or
leave a little early when family responsibilities arose. As Mrs. Lane said, “Giving a little gets
you a lot in return” (Interview, October 30, 2012). In her school, the teachers appeared to be
more invested in the CCSS implementation process and were already creating new lessons based
on the presentations during the rollout year. She, her literacy coach, and her assistant principal,
Mrs. Adams, all reported that teachers were sharing their new ideas and initial successes with
administration and with each other.

In addition to building relationships and trust among administrators and teachers, there
are two additional Systems Thinking disciplines that are required in a successful learning
organization that are directly related to supporting teachers to improve instruction: Team
Learning and Personal Mastery. As I review the interview data from all three of the study
participants’ groups, I see glimpses of them from time to time, but they are more notable in their absence.

Senge has this to say about Team Learning: “When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise” (2006, p. 5). All of the participants expressed their concerns in their interviews about how to motivate teachers to become invested enough in the Common Core State Standards to truly make them their own in instruction. And some of this Team Learning became evident later in the school year. The coaches described conversations in PLC team meetings where teachers shared ideas about how to implement what was learned in the monthly presentations. Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Adams, the principal and assistant principal respectively at Midtown Middle School, shared anecdotes about teachers asking them to come in to classes and observe what they were doing as a result of what they had learned. However, I would suggest that the data indicates that these positive examples of Team Learning were overshadowed by the lack of buy-in and follow through on the part of the district administrators, the building administrators, and the literacy coaches. In late January, after we had completed four presentations on the Common Core Standards that included ideas for practice and implementation in the classroom, neither Amanda at Southside MS nor I had seen any follow through in our buildings: “We’re just doing what we’ve always done. So it has not had a major impact” (Amanda, interview, January 28, 2013). Even by the end of the school year, Midtown Middle School remained the only one of the three in this study who were reporting that teachers were actually discussing the Standards and using them in instructional planning, although both administrators and the literacy coach acknowledged that this was on a very small scale. So instead of seeing widespread excitement based on the promise of new and better standards, there
was evidence of a lack of Team Learning, reflecting what Senge defines as “wasted energy” in which “[i]ndividuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not efficiently translate to team effort” (2006, p. 217). This appears to be directly related to the District’s weak Shared Vision described in the section above as well as a lack of Personal Mastery.

In our attempts to support our teachers through high quality professional development, we must ensure that we are privileging and nurturing the components of Systems Thinking that we have been examining. If we are going to make a difference in the lives of our students, we must become more effective in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Fullan, 2007b). From their extensive research and work on providing professional development to teachers, Lyons and Pinnell (2001) stress that “there must be a strong commitment to provide initial and ongoing high-quality professional development for all members of the schoolwide literacy team” in order to “develop a shared understanding that underpins the school-wide literacy program” (pp. 2-3). If this can be done in a collaborative way that is safe and supportive, the Team Learning and confidence that result may help prevent loss of so many of our best and brightest teachers.

While Team Learning is vital in a learning organization, it will not occur unless the system values and cultivates the expectation that Personal Mastery is the responsibility of each of its members. According to Senge and Lannon-Kim (1991), “Personal Mastery for us is a sort of anchor. When all is said and done, the school must create an environment where everyone – students, teachers, staff – has the opportunity to continually enhance their capacity to create results that really matter to them, that is to learn” (p.9). It was clear from my interviews and from the exit slips that coaches reviewed after each presentation that many of the teachers and administrators were learning more about the new standards, but we were still a long way from
creating the results that we desired in terms of improved literacy achievement for all of our students. This would require Team Learning, as well as Personal Mastery, on the part of all staff. Personal Mastery among my study participants will be discussed in Component 4 below in reference to building leadership capacity.

**Component 3: Use data to make decisions about literacy teaching and learning.** As mentioned in Chapter Four, administrators and literacy coaches alike made reference to their efforts at utilizing the burgeoning amount of literacy data that was available to them. In the Comprehensive Literacy Plan, the school data wall is a vital component for collegial discussions about the students who are making progress, those who are not, and what we can do about it. One principal in particular, Mr. Rand, credits the “Wall” with finally helping him to see each student as a reader with individual needs. In addition to the Literacy Data Wall, there is a district data collection system that was undergoing a major upgrade at the end of this school year; although many teachers and administrators felt that this system was not particularly user-friendly, there are staff members in every building with the responsibility to help you access almost any kind of information needed about demographics, local and state assessment scores, report cards, instructional needs, Special Education, 504 and Response to Intervention plans, etc. At the district level, the Director of Assessment is always willing to assist you with this as well. In the year of this study, the district had just fully implemented MAP testing (Measures of Academic Progress) as a universal screener and was in the process of training administrators and coaches to support teachers in using the data to differentiate instruction.

The truth is that data did not come up in most of my interviews, and in all fairness, these discussions were most likely not the venue in which to expect that. My questions and our discussions were focused on macro topics such as leadership and the Common Core
implementation in the district. The superintendent, Dr. Vargas, had recently incorporated a student growth model into the administrators’ evaluation process, so I would have expected that this added incentive to engage with the data and analyze it with teachers would have been on administrators’ minds. The superintendent mentioned it in both of our interviews in regards to the importance of building administrators preparing themselves and their teachers for the new Common Core Standards and the concordant assessments that would go along with it. He explained that “the state requirement is such that student achievement is a significant part of their performance appraisal process…so they have specific targets this year in their evaluations” (Interview, October 10, 2012). In our final interview on April 30, 2012, he connected this evaluation system to the Common Core rollout when he told me he was stressing the importance of principals becoming informed about CCSS and taking the lead in this initiative rather than delegating it to the coaches because “they’re going to have to hold teachers responsible through their evaluations” for this new CCSS-aligned instruction.

In contrast to the other two principals, Mrs. Lane and Mr. Rand, Mr. Marks at Southside mentioned data analysis as one of his instructional responsibilities in both of our interviews, and specifically related this to how he and his coach, Amanda, work together to help teachers use the data effectively. He described a “data day” that occurred in the fall and then again in the spring in which he, his assistants, and the literacy coach would provide the data for analysis to inform future instruction and help teachers to assess their instruction based on the progress of the students (Interviews, October 29, 2012, and May 2, 2013). In addition, he was the only principal to mention that he meets regularly with the superintendent to review his own goals and examine the data based on his evaluation (Interview, October 29, 2012). Mrs. Jade, an assistant principal in my building, described the work that she had done over the school year with me, her Literacy
Coach, in using PLC meeting time for data analysis by saying, “We had to really be consistent and see the change over time and see the value over time,” but she added that this use of data would not become a sustainable part of the district’s system unless the “building leaders…value that and [show] they will want to make it a priority” (Interview, May, 14, 2013). This is directly related to the Shared Vision that would be cultivated by a stronger commitment to a system such as the Comprehensive Literacy Model from the superintendent on down.

Although there is a lot of work to be done in this area, particularly in ensuring that data-based decisions are part of classroom instruction, the structure is in place to move forward in using this data to make decisions about literacy teaching and learning if the leaders are willing to recommit themselves to a consistent districtwide system.

**Component 4: Build leadership capacity.** There was ample evidence that district administrators understand the importance of developing leadership capacity in the building administrators, and that the superintendent made his expectations on this very clear at the administrator meetings. Administrators have been provided with books such as *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap…and Others Don’t* by Jim Collins, *The Speed of Trust* by Stephen Covey, and *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* by Daniel Goleman. The first two were read and discussed at these meetings. A speaker was brought in to talk to administrators about how understanding emotional intelligence can improve your work with others, but the reading of the book was not required. An assistant principal, Mrs. Adams, told me in an email (June 20, 2014) that it seems “like we just do the book and then move on to the next thing,” which harkens back to the consistent administrator complaint that there is simply too much to do to spend the time they’d like to on professional learning to improve their instructional leadership.
In 2009, during the very early days of the literacy coach initiative, the district brought in a team from Jim Knight’s University of Kansas Coaching Project (www.instructionalcoach.org). At that time, both the administrators and the literacy coaches were excited about the promise of what literacy coaching might mean in our schools, and the presentation was well-received. We were introduced to the responsibilities of the literacy coaches as well as the expectations for the district administrators and building administrators when working with the coaches. We were given suggestions for building our shared leadership to have a greater impact on student learning. Plans were made to develop an ongoing relationship with the Knight Instructional Coaching Project, but a change in administration prevented that from ever happening. There was no follow-up on this professional development (Mrs. Bales, district curriculum specialist, interview, May 1, 2013).

While the leadership in our schools is always under scrutiny, it would seem that the adoption of major initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards brings it even more to the forefront. This research project certainly influenced the key players’ perceptions and reflections on instructional leadership, if only for the time we spent in our interviews, but the leadership styles in our district were put under a microscope for this year as we judged ourselves and each other by how we took on or failed to take on the instructional leadership responsibilities that went with this rollout.

We were not alone at that time in our efforts to provide professional development to principals and teachers on the Common Core standards. In a report on the third year of national implementation of the CCSS conducted by the Center on Education Policy, Kober, McIntosh, and Rentner reported the results of a survey that had been conducted from February through May of 2013 which coincided with my own research study. All of the 40 states that responded
reported that they were providing professional development on the new Standards to teachers, and 39 states were including principals in the early trainings. However, the majority of the participating states reported that it was a “major challenge to provide professional development and other supports for teachers in sufficient quantity and quality” (2013, p. 2).

Recall that building this kind of capacity is not only a part of the Adolescent Literacy Framework as defined by the research of Irvin, Meltzer, and Duke (2007); it is also required for an effective learning organization as envisioned by Senge (2006), a system that is capable of learning and growing in their efforts at improvement. Leadership capacity is built through a consistent balance of Shared Vision, Team Learning, and Personal Mastery. These three disciplines were introduced in Components 1 and 2 in the prior sections of this chapter. So based on the two frameworks of my research, I would insist that, without a system’s sense of Personal Mastery that is embraced by all participants, any attempts at building leadership capacity that occur will be isolated instead of shared and have minimum impact on the overall learning of the stakeholders in this district: students, teachers, administrators, and even the broader community.

Here is a synthesis of what I found in my interviews with our participants with regards to their possession of the characteristic of Personal Mastery needed for Team Learning. If there were a prize for Personal Mastery, the literacy coaches would win it based on their love of learning that evidenced itself in their reading, going to conferences, sharing and discussing issues with others, and their overall passion for literacy. It would be fair to say that this is a characteristic of the literacy coach position and that a certain type of person would likely apply for this job; in fact, strong classroom instruction background is part of the coach’s job description. In addition, it is clear that the assistant superintendent, Mrs. Jeffries, and her two curriculum specialists, Mrs. Dress and Mrs. Bales, also possess Personal Mastery because they
share the same passion for learning. Here I would remind the reader that all three of these ladies were classroom teachers and were holding or had held a position with responsibilities similar to that of a literacy coach. Most of the building administrators did not show this same type of Personal Mastery, and instead relied on someone else to help them with their learning and lend them authority in the field of literacy instruction. The superintendent told me on several occasions that his assistant superintendent of curriculum was his go-to person in that area; the building administrators repeatedly referred to their coaches when the talk turned to learning about literacy instruction. This is also understandable since only two of them had a solid language arts instruction background. However, this raises a serious issue. As so many experts in the research literature stress, we need a community of learners in leadership in order to make the comprehensive and sustained changes required for successful improvement in adolescent literacy achievement. The principal must be the “lead learner” according to Barth, “engaging in the most important enterprise of the schoolhouse – experiencing, displaying, modeling, and celebrating what it is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will do” (1995, p. 80). Senge insists that the concept of being a lifelong learner is necessary in a learning organization and is expressed in the discipline of Personal Mastery; people who possess this characteristic are never done learning or seeking to improve themselves and their organization.

Another of the indicators of building leadership capacity in the Irvin, Meltzer, and Duke model is to share responsibilities for school projects and initiatives in order to create a system that supports literacy learning (2007, p. 180). This is only possible if all of the literacy leaders, and in this case, the literacy coaches in particular, have the support of the administration when working toward the change that is needed. According to the coach interviews, this support was
not consistently provided across all three schools. Even an assistant principal, Mrs. Jade, recognized that it was lacking when she described what she observed:

I think the very first piece of that - that like a make-it-or-break-it piece - is the relationship between the coach and the administration… You guys have this odd in-between role where you’re not quite administrator, and you’re not quite teacher. And so that impacts the way that all staff members view you… so the lit team at the district is making decisions…and then you bring them back to this staff, but because you’re not an administrator, it’s difficult to say…, “You will do these things.” There’s resistance there… So had an administrator been… teaming with [the literacy coach], helping her… saying, “Here’s what we’re going to do”… If that piece isn’t in place, it’s difficult for you to have the most effective role. (Interview, October 18, 2012)

So it would appear that the district possesses the resources to provide high quality professional development as well as the desire to do so, but what I learned from my interviews is that there are roadblocks that prevent this from happening in a systematic way. It appears that there are two reasons for this: Not enough time due to competing priorities and a lack of an overall vision of organizational learning. As a result, there is no follow-through or monitoring of such learning, which minimizes the opportunities to reflect on and build leadership capacity as a result of this learning.

Component 5: Allocate resources to support literacy. Even though there was talk of budget cuts and the need to save money in Lakeside during the 2012-13 school year, this suburban district remained in strong financial shape compared with many of the schools in the immediate area and around the country. District and building administration continued to fund professional development, material resources including both building infrastructure and
curriculum needs, and technology in their efforts to meet the new demands of looming Common Core State Standards. They were in their first year of the adoption of Ruth Culham’s Traits Writing program and were beginning the research into a reading series adoption which was a change in focus since they had been committed to the Readers Workshop model for almost 20 years at that point. Both of these curriculum adoptions involved teacher, administrator, and literacy coach input. All building coaches were given a generous budget at the end of this school year to purchase high quality book room books, in cooperation with the building librarians, to meet the Common Core shifts of increased rigor and more informational reading. In this Component, Lakeside is, fortunately, well-situated to support literacy instruction improvement.

**Additional component A: Mental models.** This discipline of Senge’s Systems Thinking may not be mentioned directly in Irvin’s action plan to improve adolescent literacy, but it crosses over all of the above components and deserves mention here in my review of the Systems Thinking evident in Lakeside School District. According to Senge, “Mental Models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action” (2006, p. 8).

Two different but important Mental Models that rose to the surface in this study were that of a learner and that of a member of a collaborative team who rely on each other to achieve the organizations goals.

Coaches are learners, as shown again and again in our interviews and my observations. They see themselves as professionals who are open to new ideas and who form tentative hypotheses about student achievement that can be revised as new information arises. Recall all the different examples of how coaches learn: from each other, the professional literature, observing and working in classrooms, attending conferences, taking graduate classes, examining
data from assessments and student work, among other things. Two of the assistant principals who had language arts classroom teaching experience, Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Jade, exhibited similar Mental Models. If more of the middle school leadership saw themselves as learners, I would suggest that the implementation of the CCSS would have gone even more smoothly and shown a greater impact on teaching by the end of the first year. Most of the administrators in this study relied on someone else to help them to learn what they needed about the new Standards and may have been unwilling to show their lack of knowledge in this case.

The other Mental Model that would contribute to the overall success of the district’s attempts to provide the necessary instruction to all students is that of a partner or a team member who shares leadership and learning with the other members. If administrators were able to put aside their pride and the need to appear as if they know everything, I believe that a stronger foundation of shared leadership would create a more effective organization. The only real example of shared leadership that emerged from this study was that of the female team at Midtown: Mrs. Lane, principal, Mrs. Adams, assistant principal, and Missy, their literacy coach, who had forged a tightly knit team wherein the strengths and knowledge of each member support and uplift the other members.

An examination of my conversations with the district superintendent shows little to no evidence that he had adopted either the Mental Model of a true learner or that of a leader who cultivates shared leadership. This lack at the uppermost level of the district impedes the development of these Models in those who follow his lead.

According to Senge, Mental Models can both facilitate and impede learning and progress in an organization. This organization needs safe and honest ways to uncover and discuss the
current Mental Models of Lakeside’s leaders and then find ways to support and challenge them to improve them (2006, p. 167). I will address this in my recommendations below.

**Additional component B: Systems thinking.** It is appropriate, and even necessary, to conclude our discussion of the overall conceptual framework of this study through a Systems Thinking lens. Consider the Systems Thinking disciplines that have been referenced throughout this study: Shared Vision, Personal Mastery, Team Learning, and Mental Models. How do they fit together to help us better understand the learning organization in Lakeside School District?

Systems Thinking requires a “shift of mind,” or a way of “seeing the world anew” (Senge, 2006, p. 68), and it seems as if that is exactly what this school district needs in order to divorce itself from its historical and embedded ways of doing business. It certainly bears mention here that Lakeside School District is not alone in the field of education in this regard; most schools continue to operate under the archaic industrial model whose purpose was to create a civilized and productive society (Kafka, 2009, Little, 2003; Lortie, 1975). The actions of our study participants continue because that is the way they have always done it. Two of the building administrators with long tenures as school leaders describe the disquiet they feel knowing that their jobs have changed so drastically over the years (Interviews, October 17, 2012, and October 18, 2012). The entire education system needs a drastic overhaul that will rebuild it from the ground up as a true learning organization with a Shared Vision, the necessary Mental Models, and the Personal Mastery to foster Team Learning in which the efforts of the whole far outweigh the individual contributions of each member.

This overhaul requires Systems Thinking, “a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (Senge, 2006, p. 68). The ability to see in this manner requires a leader
who is willing to look forward to the new challenges that are facing his district as well as to look back on the pieces that are in place that can help the district prepare for the future.

**Conclusion.** When we look at Lakeside District through the lens of my theoretical conceptual framework, it is clear that it has many of the component pieces of a system to improve adolescent literacy instruction in place. They have a framework for a literacy action plan in the Comprehensive Literacy Model, a strong curriculum department and literacy coaches to support teachers in improving literacy instruction, an ample amount of both state and local literacy data to inform instruction, an understanding of the importance of building leadership capacity, and adequate resources to support literacy. And yet, they continue to struggle to build the capacity of all staff members in order to move ahead as a cohesive learning organization. In the end, it is the lack of Systems Thinking that prevents this school district, and many just like it, from achieving true change that will make a difference for all our students.

**Zoom in on Answers to Research Questions**

**Research question 1.** *How do middle school building administrators and literacy coaches understand and enact their own shared instructional leadership responsibilities in the process of implementing Common Core State Standards?*

*Any good researcher (or teacher) will always ask herself this question of any objective: What will it look like when it happens? If you go to all the trouble of attempting to achieve something worth its effort, you need to know how it looks when you get there or what evidence to look for as your strive toward approximation of your goal. I had hoped, through this question, to actually hear and see shared instructional leadership in action in my school district. In my*
interviews, I first had to ascertain what the participants’ understanding of instructional leadership might be.

While I saw evidence of the understanding of this concept, I found variations of the enactment of this in the first year of the Common Core rollout. At the district level, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the two language arts curriculum specialists viewed the literacy coaches as a vital part of the implementation of the new Common Core Standards, used them as a “think tank” to develop and hone presentations, and expected them to support their building administrators as they took the lead on sharing these with their staffs. Further, the district expectation that was communicated to the principals was that they were expected to use their literacy coaches to support the rollout as a way to share leadership with them. The major concern that arose here was that the lack of literacy background of some of the building administrators would compel them to delegate this work to the coach, thereby missing an opportunity to act as the instructional leader. This expectation played out in different ways at the building level.

As described in Chapter Four, there were three versions of building administrator/coach shared leadership enacted at the three middle schools during the 2012-13 year. First, the shared leadership at my own school saw little change with the incumbent principal and assistant principal, but the introduction of a new assistant fresh from the classroom gave us an opportunity to begin to build a productive shared leadership relationship. Next, at Southside Middle School, the new literacy coach, Amanda, appeared to be the catalyst they needed to begin to forge a strong shared leadership team that was already making headway by the end of her first year, the year of this study. Finally, Midtown’s strong team of a female principal, an assistant principal with a solid language arts background, and their coach, Missy, continued to build on an effective
relationship that utilized the strengths of all three and most likely was creating the strongest understanding of the new Common Core State Standards.

At Northside Middle School where I was the literacy coach at the time of this study, the shared leadership did not change significantly in the face of this major school improvement initiative. The principal’s and the coach’s responsibilities remained the same in the Common Core rollout: he took the lead on management issues with occasional interest in instructional leadership, and the assistant principals and the literacy coach shared responsibility for enacting literacy directives with the support of the district language arts specialists and the assistant superintendent of curriculum. In our final interview, the principal, Mr. Rand, was discussing his plans for the following year, which would include a new literacy coach as I prepared to move out of state, when he said, “I have to be close with her in helping to guide those individuals that may or may not be [fulfilling] the [instructional] expectations. And I don’t think I’m there yet” (Interview, May 3, 2012). Considering that this principal, a self-described building manager, had been a middle school administrator for 20 years at the time of this study, I believe this offers evidence that he had, at best, a tenuous grasp on the practice of shared instructional leadership. In contrast, we had a brand new assistant principal that year in Mrs. Jade, who had recent classroom literacy instruction experience; she and I created a new partnership to support and improve literacy instruction across the curriculum. At the end of this school year, she reflected on our work together and compared it to that of the principal and coach in her former school:

…you and I have shared [the work of Common Core rollout] the whole year, and we’ve been pretty consistent with how we’ve done that. [At my former school,] our administrators would come to PLCs (team meetings) most of the time but they were really more observers, and [they did] none of the planning…that was the literacy coach
on her own. Here I think you and I worked more as a team than [they] did…but I think without the coaches’ role, we’d have been in trouble because you guys did a lot of the learning, a lot of the legwork. (Interview, May 14, 2013)

Unfortunately, both of us left our positions at the end of the year, so the new hires will have to start over again in this endeavor.

At Southside Middle School, they also were building shared leadership from the ground up with a new literacy coach this year. I’ve reported on how the trust and respect among the building administrators and Amanda grew over the school year, and this appeared to impact the entire staff as they engaged in book studies to learn more about Common Core implementation. In addition, this leadership team was making headway in consistent administration and collaborative scoring of common assessments which led to improved analysis of the resulting data and discussion about its impact on instruction. When I interviewed the principal, Mr. Marks, on May 2, 2013, he listed these and other ways he was working with his literacy coach to build staff understanding of and commitment to the instruction required by the new standards. He described his work with Amanda on the CCSS rollout by saying, “We’re providing professional support and development, and we’re putting it on their backs (holding teachers responsible for the learning)…I think we’ve done a good job of building the people up and preparing them…I think they’re ready to go.”

At the end of this school year, the literacy coach left her position for an assistant principal’s job, so although her experience held promise for her new school, it left Southside administration in the position of starting over again with a new coach.
That leaves us with Midtown Middle School, which was the singular exemplar of shared leadership that I found in this study. The shared leadership forged among the principal, one assistant principal, and the literacy coach provides us with a lesson on how to work together to make an impact on the students and staff, as well as on the broader district education community that surrounds a school.

All three, in separate interviews across the entire school year, corroborated each other’s stories about the ways they combined their talents and shared the responsibilities for high expectations for their teachers as well as job-embedded support for the learning teachers needed to meet those expectations. All three cited their enthusiasm and excitement for the Common Core because these shifts aligned with what the team had been working toward together since Missy joined them four years earlier.

The assistant principal, Mrs. Adams, described her own version of collaboration in relating a common occurrence when the coach would come to the administrators to express a concern, for example, about the frequent interruptions in language arts instruction time when students are pulled for additional support services or lessons. The administrators worked with the staff to create a new schedule that protected their literacy instruction time. When the assistant principal and coach approach the principal, Mrs. Lane, with their concerns about teachers who are struggling with instruction, the principal will meet with the teachers and help them brainstorm ways that the coach can help them realize a goal they themselves wanted to achieve. The three of them attend conferences together in order to “build a common philosophy and a common idea of where we’re headed,” according to the assistant principal, Mrs. Adams. They return to the building to meet with teams to help them devise ways to incorporate new learning into their own grade-level curriculum, such as Inquiry Circles after listening to Smokey Daniels
speak. “We don’t do our jobs because it’s a job. It’s a passion, and it’s a commitment, and we live it. We read it, we write it, we do it every day” (Interview, October 5, 2012). Mrs. Lane, the principal of that school believes that, “It’s super important…that she (the literacy coach) can come back and talk to me and something’s going to happen…That’s how much I trust her word” (Interview, October 30, 2012).

Interestingly in their school’s rollout of the Common Core, they were the only middle school where the coach did not have a part in the presentations. The principal thought this was important because she wanted the staff to see that the administrative team was leading the charge and that this was vitally important to them. “I don’t want them to think it’s coming from [the literacy coach] – or even from the district people. This is us saying, ‘We are going to do this together, and I’m going to help’” (Interview, May 21, 2012). And as for the coach, you may recall in Chapter Four that Missy stated that she has “the full support…the full backing” of both of her administrators and that it “opens a lot more doors for me” in her coaching efforts (Interview, October 15, 2012). The same correlation of evidence of mutual admiration and enthusiasm for their work does not appear in the interviews with the other two administrator/coach teams in my study.

I would like to posit that this effective shared leadership resulted in a better reception among Midtown’s teachers than was found in either of the other schools. Although the principal, assistant principal and coach all agreed that they still had a long way to go in this area, all three reported teacher excitement as early as January when staff was given the opportunity to share some of the activities they were trying out in their classrooms and also began to make plans in team meetings for how to incorporate more of the Common Core instructional shifts into their daily work.
And yet sadly, I must conclude this exemplar tale with another illustration of the instability of leadership in schools. Michael Fullan has completed several meta-analyses on whole school reform research and concludes that “one of the most powerful factors known to undermine continuation is staff and administrative turnover” (2007b, p. 103); if that is true, then the changes that Lakeside District has seen since the conclusion of this study do not bode well for continuous improvement. Recently, both the principal at Midtown Middle School, Mrs. Lane, and her assistant principal, Mrs. Adams, left their positions for various reasons, while the school and the literacy coach are tasked with the hard work of building another leadership team that will, hopefully, resonate with some of the strengths of the former as well as fresh, exciting contributions from the new.

A major educational initiative holds the potential for placing leadership under the microscope so that the stakeholders can examine both the implementation and the results of the new initiative. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards is an enterprise in school improvement which afforded me the opportunity to examine instructional leadership in the perfect situation. My discussions with the participants made it clear that they certainly did reflect upon their instructional leadership, if only for the time we spent in our interviews, but the impact of their understanding and enactment of leadership, whether their own or that shared with the literacy coaches, holds potential for school improvement for thousands of middle school students.

In the end, it was difficult to separate the answers to this question about shared leadership in the CCSS rollout from the answers to Research Question 2 concerning the contributions of literacy coaches because the understanding of this relationship continues to evolve and change for all of the participant groups.
Research question 2. How has the introduction of literacy coaches contributed to the overall instructional leadership of these building administrators?

Ever since the district adopted the Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy Model, the district curriculum department had been working diligently to institute Feature 2 of the model: “Coaching and Mentoring uses contingent scaffolding, coaching cycles, and a gradual release model for increasing teacher efficacy” (http://ualr.edu/literacy/the-ten-features/). Although we were currently in our fourth year of having literacy coaches in our district at the time of this study, I was part of the early planning stages in my work at the district level with professional development. Because of this, I take personal pride in making this effort a success for students, teachers, administrators and support staff. In my ongoing experience with the other district literacy coaches, I believe that every one of us feels this same commitment, and this colors my interpretation of the answer to this question.

The data from my interviews suggest that the leadership of every administrator in this study has been influenced by the introduction of literacy coaches in a positive manner. The major contributions have been to support the administrators’ literacy learning and to support the administrative efforts to increase teacher instructional capacity. An assistant principal, Mrs. Adams, invoked an interesting metaphor when she told me she was “swimming upstream” before her coach came on board. “I felt every day at the end of the day that I had gotten nowhere…It was a lot of complaining teachers, a lot of frustration, a lot of ‘they don’t know what to do’” until “[Missy] came along, (and) so did the PLC concept, which changed our middle schools quite a bit” (Interview, October 5, 2012). Mr. Green, another assistant principal, stated in our interview on October 17th of that year that he felt there was “a missing component…to the leadership team for a number of years. And that has been addressed by the literacy coach
coming.” He went on to add that this addition had made the team stronger by strengthening the literacy cause and gave administration an “added authority” with the staff now that “the reinforcements have arrived.”

A common recurring thread is that the administrators credited their literacy coach as one of their greatest influences in their own professional learning. Let’s start near the top. All three of the district curriculum administrators (assistant superintendent of curriculum and the two language arts curriculum specialists) gave effusive praise to the literacy coaches for keeping them abreast of best practices and challenging them to meet the diverse needs of the students in the buildings across the district. I believe that there are several reasons why this group shared literacy leadership so readily and so easily with the coaches. For one, all three of these ladies had language arts instruction background and had extensive training in language and literacy development as did the coaches. Additionally, these administrators were currently part-time coaches themselves, had been a literacy coach in the past, or had performed duties similar to those of a literacy coach in a prior position, so they were fully aware of the scope and depth of the responsibilities. In our interviews and in our professional interactions, the literacy coaches and these administrators shared a mutual respect and strong bonds of sisterhood in advancing the cause of literacy.

When asked about how she pursued her own professional development, the assistant superintendent had this to say: “I trust the people who work for me. I have a lot of wonderful literacy coaches who love this kind of stuff and they’re always looking out and… [sending] me things all the time” (Interview, October 25, 2012). Later in the same conversation, she alluded to the fact that literacy coaches are “invaluable” in supporting the learning of their building administrators who may not seek out their own professional development because they have the
attitude that, “You know, you don’t need to tell me. I’m fine.” Both Mrs. Dress and Mrs. Bales, our language arts curriculum specialists, spoke of being both supported and challenged by the coaches in good times and in bad: “So I think for me, you know, all of the [coaches] that I work directly with are the greatest influences for me…wanting to be better at what I do” (Mrs. Dress, interview, October 9, 2012).

A consistent worry in literacy coaching both in our district and across the country is that the nebulous job description of the coach may lead to overburdening them with responsibilities beyond their purview which could negatively impact their ability to effect instructional change and student achievement (Hunt & Hansfield, 2013; L’Allier et al., 2010; Mangin, 2009; McKenna & Walpole, 2008; Mraz et al., 2008; Shanklin, 2007; Sweeney, 2011). You may recall that in Chapter Four, Mrs. Bales, one of the language arts curriculum specialists, spoke about “slippage,” her term for the erosion of the coaches’ focus on classroom instruction in the face of encroaching responsibilities for RtI intervention groups and administration, data management, clerical work, leading meetings, etc. Every district administrator mentioned the same concern regarding shared leadership between the principals and the literacy coaches: in some cases, principals allow or expect their coaches to usurp some of their own instructional leadership responsibilities. The superintendent, as mentioned earlier, made it clear in both of our interviews that he has repeatedly cautioned building administrators to be the instructional leader who is “out in front moving people along” and to not rely too heavily on coaches because they are not administrators (Interview, October 10, 2012). The assistant administrator recognized the temptation to put too much responsibility on the coaches in herself when she said, “I find myself thinking, how can we get this out? Maybe the coaches can do it, and I have to be thoughtful that we’re not putting too much on them” (Interview, October 25, 2012). In the same conversation,
she worried that, “They (coaches) are leading a lot of meetings that maybe the principal should be leading, and I think sometimes a principal says, ‘Well, the literacy coach will handle that.”

In their review of the literature in the study entitled, “The Emotional Landscapes of Literacy Coaching: Issues of Identity, Power, and Positioning,” Hunt and Handsfield note that the role of the coach is open to interpretation depending on the context, personalities, and expectations of the school. This role confusion leads to frustration on the part of the literacy coaches and may “impede their work with teachers and principals” (2013, p. 49); they argue that more clearly defined roles as well as professional development will lead to more effective coaching partnerships. “Literacy coaching should be viewed as more than a series of tasks to be completed and roles to be fulfilled,” according to the authors (p. 73), so that coaches are empowered to improve instruction, positively impact student achievement, and become a catalyst for change in our schools.

The coaches’ contribution also reaches beyond the administrators themselves to the literacy learning of the staff. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Mr. Rand, a principal, loves to tell the story of how the introduction of the literacy coaches helped to improve the climate of the building by helping administration and staff to understand the importance of informal reading assessments such as running records which yielded guided reading levels of the students and then could be used to provide instructional and independent reading materials to each and every reader (Interviews, October 18, 2012 and May 3, 2012). He also credits his literacy coach for teaming with the school librarian to obtain additional text resources and create reading awareness and incentive programs to motivate more students to read more books. Many of the administrators who were interviewed expressed their respect for the way the coaches were trusted by teachers. This entre into classrooms provides opportunities for coaching for change
and building upon the successful instruction that is already in place; Blachowicz, Obrochta, and Fogelberg (2005) suggest that helping teachers connect new initiatives to current practice is an effective way to bring about improvement in literacy instruction. My discussions with the administrators indicated that coaches were able to achieve things that they were not due to administrators being seen as evaluators. This is one of the bridges that coaches have crafted since the launch of the coaching model in 2009.

Coaches are also seen as providing a stronger and more effective communication between the buildings and the district curriculum office by both building and district administrators.

Over in the district offices,…you guys are making those decisions on what’s best for kids. You’re bringing it back to your buildings and [you’re] the resource of a trainer, someone to help us get resources, to help model…That takes away the need for the teacher to go out and seek a class or seek a book or whatever. You have someone right there to tell you and help you and teach you to do it. (Mrs. Jade, assistant principal, interview, October 18, 2012)

Another building administrator expressed his gratitude for having a literacy expert to provide the bridge between him and the teachers. Speaking in the voice of a teacher who would like support, he said this:

And the literacy coach is one person who should be my best friend, help me to figure out…what’s the next thing I should try? What’s the most important thing to try to implement in my class to keep up with what I’m being expected to do for the kids? (Mr. Green, assistant principal, interview, October 17, 2012)
The principal in that same building, Mr. Rand, gave the coach credit for obtaining more literacy resources and then helping the teachers make better use of them: “So (she) conquered that for them, so [the resources are] there for them. And now (she is) coaching them…[and] modeling what it looks like” (Interview, October 18, 2012).

Mrs. Dress, a district curriculum specialist, spoke of how she sees her work with the coaches as creating “liaisons” between district administration, administrators and teachers so that “all voices can be heard” (Interview, October 9, 2012). This resonates with other descriptions of the literacy coaches as providing bridges or reinforcements in my interviews with different administrators.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the assistant superintendent saw the rollout of the Common Core Standards as providing an opportunity to build shared leadership between the building administrators and the coaches. She observed that the process helped principals to realize that they couldn’t have done it alone, nor could they simply turn it over to the coaches, and thus the experience will strengthen the shared leadership in the future.

The relationship between an administrator and a literacy coach can be likened to a dance in which the partners must create a balance in order to achieve symmetry, flow, and an effective result. Ippolito’s research (2009) on this issue finds that a principal’s relationship with a coach may fall anywhere on a continuum from neglectful to interfering, with the ultimate goal being to create a balanced partnership that will lead to a successful literacy initiative and improved student learning. This requires building a “partnering stance” that is part of a “culture of collaboration and professional learning” (p. 3). The Mental Models of leadership that this partnership is based on will build the Shared Vision of the leaders; their modeling of these
behaviors along with the results that are achieved through them will be mirrored by the faculty and become an embedded part of the Team Learning culture of the entire building. Senge compares challenges to change in education to those in business: “They involve fundamental cultural changes, and that will require collective learning. They involve people at multiple levels thinking together about significant and enduring solutions we might create, and then helping those solutions come about” (O’Neil, 1995, p. 21).

What I found in my research is that there is a limited understanding among administrators of the importance of this relationship and the impact it can and should have upon actual student achievement. The adoption of the coaching initiative, while lauded by all administrators, has yet to reach full potential because of the limited opportunities for real partnerships in this school district. Our administrators, just like administrators all over the country, are bombarded by vast and tremendous demands and responsibilities and so rely on the literacy coaches to share these burdens without doing the hard work of building a true shared leadership model. It is almost as if they are engaged in the “parallel play” of childhood where each player is going about their daily business alongside the other with little or no interaction or sharing of the challenges and successes (Donaldson, 2006).

Although every building administrator and literacy coach must do his or her part in growing and nurturing this partnership, district administration holds the primary responsibility for this untapped resource since they created the coaching model and provided the support for it since its inception. “I think that might be one of the pieces the district missed out on. They didn’t form enough bonds between literacy coaches and administrators,” concurred Mrs. Adams, an assistant principal, at our interview on October 5, 2012. She suggested that the district could create shared learning opportunities such as attending conferences together for administrators...
and coaches that are required instead of optional: “If they did those things together, they would build a common philosophy and a common idea of where we’re headed.”

**Research question 3.** *How has the district’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards influenced administrators’ and literacy coaches’ understanding of reading and writing instruction?*

The looming implementation of the new Common Core State Standards provided me with the perfect laboratory in which to conduct my study of shared instructional leadership in Lakeside middle schools between the administrators and the literacy coaches. This unprecedented educational undertaking offers unlimited opportunities for professional development of the stakeholders in our schools, the planning and coordination of rolling this plan out to district staff, honest assessment of district strengths and needs, and redesign of curriculum and instruction. And while it may be argued that the instructional shifts that come along with the new standards have always been the basis of best practice for many in the field, the scope of the adoption and implementation will require new learning, thinking, and instruction for each and every one of us in education across the country.

In Chapter Four, we learned that the literacy coaches had begun to discuss and research the Common Core Standards in the school year prior to this research study. As a group of practitioners who prided ourselves on staying on top of the latest in literacy, we had been hearing about the standards at the conferences we attended, and we would share articles and internet sites related to the Standards. The two district curriculum specialists, Mrs. Dress and Mrs. Bales, were a part of this ad hoc “study group” since they were district literacy coaches, but their supervisor, the assistant superintendent of curriculum, was not present at most of the coach meetings that year. This was due to the fact that she had just taken on this new position and was in the process
of learning the responsibilities and creating her own version of what her job would entail. You may recall that even the curriculum specialists made it abundantly clear that they did not feel confident enough to take the lead on the learning that was required for this major initiative. The middle school language arts curriculum specialist, Mrs. Dress, was clearly worried that administrators and coaches alike were looking to her and the other district curriculum people to answer their questions about CCSS when I interviewed her in October of 2012. There was a common feeling that we did not have enough support or information to move ahead with implementation, and although we were scouring the internet and the literature, we were still concerned. “I think as coaches we’re all doing the best we can to keep our teachers informed of the changes that have been made and the new PARCC assessment…, but I don't think there’s been a lot of direction from the state about any of this” (Interview, October 9, 2012). Even the assistant superintendent of curriculum, Mrs. Jeffries, felt as though everything about the new standards had been coming out in “pieces, and…I don’t have a keen understanding of it myself” (Interview, October 25, 2012).

As for building administrators, they made it clear that they had little background knowledge about the standards at the beginning of our district rollout year, 2012-13. Mrs. Jade, an assistant principal, used metaphors to describe how she felt about her understanding (and that of other teachers and administrators) of the new standards when we met on October 18, 2012: “If the Common Core or traditional essay, we’re only in the introduction paragraph,” and later, “I say we are at the very, very… bottom of the mountain.” Another assistant mentioned that they had been told at the end of the prior school year that the district was going to take the lead on the introduction and implementation of the CCSS:
I really appreciated that, because again, I feel well-equipped to follow the lead and tell me what part you want me to do. I’m willing to educate myself, and I’m willing to get myself prepared to participate in that process, but I’m not the expert. (Interview, October 17, 2012)

In terms of understanding the Common Core State Standards in the fall of 2012, Lakeside School District was not alone (Bidwell, 2014; Brock, 2014; Carmichael et al., 2010; Kober, McIntosh, & Rentner, 2013; Rentner, 2013; Rothman, 2014).

It would be hard to deny that the current culture in our schools is one of pressure and concern over high stakes testing, achievement gaps, and worries over lack of adequate funding. The advent of the Common Core State Standards introduces another reason to connect higher standards with higher anxiety on the part of teachers and administrators, and this was evident in my conversations with district and building administrators and literacy coaches alike.

However, along with the worry about new expectations came a growing understanding of what these “fewer, clearer, higher” standards actually mean in terms of instruction and learning (http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Considerations.pdf). In our interviews, the coaches and the administrators referred often to the need for raising the bar to better prepare our students for college and career, literacy instruction across the curriculum, the importance of text based writing both for learning and assessment, and the need for more rigorous text resources. The coaches spoke about the need for collaboration among the different departments at the district level; for example, the literacy people would work more closely with the science curriculum specialist. And all the participants acknowledged their responsibility in learning more about these implications as we move forward.
The impact of the new Standards was evident at the highest levels in our district at the end of the year. The assistant superintendent of curriculum shared several of her plans for the upcoming school year, such as thematic unit planning to help align curriculum, a new CCSS-aligned reading text adoption, mentoring for some building administrators and the new literacy coaches, and continued professional development for both administrators and teachers (Interview, May 15, 2013). The superintendent referred to new district initiatives that were a direct result of the new demands of the Common Core, including adoption of a new middle school math instructional sequence, an upgraded technology infrastructure, the hiring of additional technology instructional support, and the start of full-day kindergarten (Interview, April 30, 2013).

One of the most positive impacts of the CCSS initiative may be that it allows us to refocus our attention on what really matters in education. Every participant in this study described the frustration resulting from educational changes and pressures that tend to fragment your work and distract you from the focus on student learning. The new standards require – even demand – that we put our time and attention to raising our expectations for all children and ensure that they are prepared for college and career. That growing understanding of a new way of looking at literacy instruction shone through in my final interviews in May of 2013. In the words of a middle school principal, Mr. Rand, “…the Common Core is, whether we like it or not, forcing us in that direction [changing how we do things], and sometimes you have to be forced to make a change” (Interview, May 3, 2013).

In order to summarize what our study participants learned about literacy instruction during the CCSS rollout, let’s turn to the Standards experts on the changes we need to pursue in education in order to better prepare our students for the 21st century for our framework. The
Common Core website, www.corestandards.org, now lists the three major instructional shifts in English Language Arts as a result of CCSS adoption which are an amalgamation of the original six shifts: 1) Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language, 2) Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational, and 3) Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction (http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/). Let’s examine the evidence of each of these shifts that arose during my research.

**Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language.** My own principal, Mr. Rand, was developing a deeper understanding of the importance of a focus on academic language and spoke about plans to work with the new literacy coach on providing additional professional development to each content team on creating target vocabulary lists, lesson plans, and anchor charts to support the learning of all students, but in particular, the English Language Learners in the building (Interview, May 3, 2013).

The coaches, building administrators and the assistant superintendent were all working on adding a substantial number of new texts to the building collections at the close of this school year in preparation for increased content area focus and the need for more complex and higher-level texts. The district gave each middle school a generous budget and then brought in publishers’ representatives to share new titles and series with the literacy coaches and help them to purchase what each building specifically needed to bolster their text resource collections.

**Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational.** The coaches in Lakeside School District, under the direction of the district curriculum department, had spent the two years prior to the Common Core implementation on a plan to teach all students how to construct a written response to text based on author’s evidence
and student’s thinking. So there was already a strong foundation in place on which to build our understanding of this shift, particularly in evidential reading and writing.

The participants in this study all showed their understanding of how these components work together to improve literacy instruction. As mentioned in the complex text shift above, the schools were beginning to add more content-related titles to their collections as a direct result of what was learned that year. In addition to the Common Core rollout in 2012-13, the district was in their first year of adoption of a new writing program, Traits Writing, so the instructional focus was already on increased writing stamina in different modes.

So although the district was in a good position to understand and make these shifts, my interviews showed new learning in two specific areas: the need to get all content area teachers on board with this shift, and the importance of adding direct instruction and practice of listening and speaking in every classroom to deepen and broaden student learning. I argue that this was the beginning of a systemic understanding of the reciprocity of all language arts instruction needed to prepare students for college and career.

An important part of the presentations was that they included activities that gave building administrators a concrete example of what to look for in the classroom. The January presentation on the Reading Standards for both English Language Arts and Content started with a guided lesson on World War II that incorporated reading, writing, listening and speaking and modeled the use of three “texts” - an informational primary source document, a literary text poem, and a painting done by a Life magazine reporter in the field. Following this lesson, participants had a chance to read an informational article for evidence and to create higher-level, text-based questions from this article. My own principal was so inspired by this presentation that he asked
me to help him create his own lesson based on the same format for an 8th grade class that was studying the first World War at the time.

The February presentation included several listening and speaking activities as well as a brainstorm session where teachers could share some of their own. These were compiled into lists that were shared with teachers and principals, and they were encouraged to incorporate them into their classrooms. These practical activities provided building administrators with examples of what to expect when they are observing in classrooms. Both administrators from Midtown Middle School, Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Adams, reported that their teachers were inviting them in to observe these things in their classrooms and sharing student work with them. The literacy coach from Southside and I both heard teachers sharing how these activities went in our team PLC meetings, although admittedly to a lesser extent.

Building administrators spoke of new understanding of literacy instruction with increased focus on evidence-based reading, writing, and speaking and were excited in May about their new expectations for instruction for the following school year.

*Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction.* In addition to adding more content related titles to the resource collections, the literacy coaches discussed the shift wherein they worked more closely with content teachers to stay abreast of what they were covering in class and used content related materials in their intervention instruction. This was having a positive impact on student learning, particularly with English Language Learners. Their study of the Common Core influenced their growing understanding that creating connections between different content classrooms would positively impact all students, and especially struggling students.
Additional evidence for this shift was in the fact that the coaches were creating content related book boxes that teachers could borrow from the school book room to support any science, social studies, health topic and even some of the math topics. This had been initiated in their collaboration with the district science and math curriculum specialists.

**Conclusion.** So when viewed through the CCSS ELA Shift lens, it appeared as though the study participants, and the district by their influence, were growing in understanding of the level of instruction required to meet the new Standards and prepare all students for college and career.

**Implications: What Does This All Mean?**

We talk the talk but we don’t walk the walk; after all was said and done, I was surprised to learn just how much our participants understood about shared instructional leadership, especially among our building leaders because this was missing in my previous interactions with them in both formal and informal venues. And if the plethora of research, consulting firms and practitioners’ guides for school improvement is any indication, we are not alone!

How do middle school administrators and literacy coaches enact shared instructional leadership when they have never been given the tools to do so? This, then, is the resulting question after I have asked and attempted to answer my own research study questions. In our middle school administrators, we have a group of intelligent, well-meaning, hard-working leaders in a district with sufficient, if not generous, resources to support them, but true instructional leadership, let alone shared instructional leadership with literacy coaches, is not a part of the systemic underlay up to this point. By resources, I do not mean just physical resources such as money for conferences, graduate courses, books and articles, inservice trainings provided
by experts, etc., because Lakeside District possesses these in good supply compared to many
other districts across the country. The resources that are lacking in Lakeside District are more
intangible: the ongoing support and expectations that the learning from these resources will be
systematically applied to their practice and their effectiveness will be measured in both formal
and informal ways.

Although it appears that the literacy coaches, through their own personally instigated
professional development, are poised to share in instructional leadership with the administrators,
the principals and assistant principals, with the one or two noted exceptions, are not ready to do
so at this point. It was clear from my interviews and observations that all of our administrators
and literacy coaches are well aware of their responsibilities as instructional leaders. They can
rattle off the activities and duties that this responsibility entails. On the part of the building
administrators, this discussion was invariably accompanied by admissions, apologies, and even
excuses as to why they are unable to carry this out.

It appears to me that the missing piece may be that these well-meaning leaders have not
been given the chance to build their knowledge base in order to fulfill this role. Certainly their
obligations are discussed at district level meetings; recall that the superintendent made this clear
when he emphatically stated, “I just basically told principals, ‘You can’t have your coaches
leading this Common Core initiative. They’re not administrators. They’re there to coach and
help, but you have to be the ones out in front moving people along’” (Interview, October 10,
2012). They are given opportunities to attend conferences and other professional development
activities; they receive a tuition reimbursement to take graduate level courses, and they have a
budget for purchasing professional texts for themselves and their building. For the specific
purpose of learning more about the Common Core, they were given a copy of the well-respected
text, *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement* by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman the previous school year, but only two of the seven building administrators interviewed had read the book.

On the surface, the support for learning in this district appears to provide an ample foundation for professional development. What is missing, and this has resounded across the research study, is that there is no accountability for this learning. No one supports building principals’ learning or offers opportunities for group learning and sharing. No one holds them responsible for evidence of what they are learning and how it applies to their professional work with teachers and students in their buildings. No one follows up after they have attended conferences or taken courses to show a collegial interest in what has been learned.

Roland Barth penned this perennial question in 1990: “Is it possible for principals to…themselves become learners, joining with others in building communities of learners?” (p. 63). Although he ultimately believes that this is not only possible, but necessary, he suggests that there is an inherent fear that new learning brings new responsibilities to effect change; when you are already stretched to the limit with your current challenges, you may be reluctant to pursue new ones.

Let’s zoom out to view what shared instructional leadership might look like in Lakeside School District. District leadership would craft a clear vision and action plan for shared leadership that included all of the stakeholders in its creation in order to ensure collective engagement and commitment to the vision. Professional development in leadership, including instructional leadership, would be an embedded part of job expectations from the highest position of superintendent, through district and building administrators, then to the literacy coaches and teachers at the building level. Expectations for this practice are set by the leadership
and then become part of all evaluations; these expectations are written into both the district and the school improvement plans. Students are not the only learners in this school district; professional learning in the form of conferences, webinars, graduate classes, and book studies are required at all levels of the organization so that all members are comfortable with seeing themselves as learners and are not afraid to ask questions and ask for help when they don’t understand something. The overall culture of the district would be one of sharing and support rather than isolation and competition.

The principal is the lead learner (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005) in a school full of learners; with the model and support of the head of the school, this will be a place that will encourage teachers, coaches, support staff, students, and parents to inquire, question, research, debate, and take the risks necessary for self-development. The principal who fails to take advantage of the learning possibilities for himself and the rest of the school community will be fighting a daily uphill battle of frustration, malaise, and burnout. The flip side of the coin of principal as lead learner will be the unwillingness of many staff members and students to commit themselves to learning because they don’t see the principal as a fellow learner. To follow this reasoning one step further, teachers will be unable to accept and learn from even the most constructive feedback in administrator evaluations when there is no evidence that the building leader understands the teacher’s practice. In my role as a literacy coach, I sat with a teacher who had just received her yearly evaluation from a principal whom she felt was completely oblivious to what a classroom teacher does on a daily basis. In her anger and frustration, she said, “He doesn’t know me. He doesn’t have a clue about what kind of teacher I am. He has only been in here twice this year for more than a minute or two, and he tries to tell me what I’m doing wrong? What does he know?”
Our assistant superintendent of curriculum recognizes this problem and has a solution for it that requires a shift in our principals’ Mental Models from the past to one in which they see themselves as a fellow learner who shares knowledge and leadership:

Gone are the days when the principals…are managers of the building…(T)he principal [has to] take a step back from having all the answers to somebody who has some of the questions and is in there with the teachers figuring things out…I think that’s kind of where we’re headed. (Mrs. Jeffries, interview, October 10, 2012)

In contrast to most of the building administrators in this study, the literacy coaches exhibit a high level of commitment to and enthusiasm for professional learning. Whether at the suggestion of the district coaches or the building coaches themselves, they are in a perpetual book study of titles they recommend to each other. In addition, there is a constant stream of emails sharing websites, articles, strategies, quotes, questions, problems, and even cartoons that are evidence of study and reflection almost around the clock. The coaches, through their own efforts and the support they receive from each other, have developed what Marie Clay calls a “self-extending system,” whereby they will naturally continue to independently learn more and build their professional capacity in their continual quest for self-improvement (Clay, 1991).

In all fairness, our middle school principals have responsibilities far beyond what the coach is responsible for: building maintenance, staff issues, student referrals for behavior and academic issues, dealing with the demands of parents and the community, school board meetings, and more. As mentioned earlier, in contrast to elementary principals, middle school administrators are expected to regularly work well beyond the school day, with sports, clubs, and community meetings. In addition, the schools in Lakeside offer the use of their buildings and facilities to community and private groups after hours which brings a whole additional host of
monitoring responsibilities. Finally, consider the new initiatives that were getting underway in the year of my study in addition to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards: new state and local RtI requirements, teacher and administrator evaluation systems, a new state-mandated school improvement program, adoption of a new writing curriculum, and the introduction of MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) testing. Is it any wonder that the administrators all felt that there wasn’t enough time in the day to meet the demands placed upon them?

It requires a deft touch to share these responsibilities among three different building administrators (one principal and two assistant principals) in each middle school. By their own admission, building principals have different levels of success in this area. Two of the administrators at one of the schools described how they had attempted to reach out to their fellow administrators to share learning resources or to meet to discuss issues with little success. One described her frustration in an email:

We do not share what we are doing as admins. It's something I feel I continually try to do, but nobody seems to want to share. It feels very much like our buildings are our buildings, so I share a lot with [my principal]. I’ve sent out several things to other people, but I can't say I’ve received much. I stopped sending because it was falling on deaf ears.

(Mrs. Adams, March 3, 2013)

In the same email exchange, she explained that administrators are required to log their professional development into the state department of education website, but “nobody from our district checks on it as far as I know.” So lack of clear expectations and holding administrators responsible for their own professional development appears to be a factor in building leadership capacity.
The Common Core initiative adds another item to a long list of causes for stress and panic in teachers and administrators. The fear of change and the dread over adding *one more thing* to an already overloaded system combine to lessen the chances that the folks who work inside the school will be open to a new initiative from outside the school.

This is the crux of what Barth calls the “professional development paradox” (1990, p. 72). Unfortunately, many of us fear that any new learning will make our job harder; change is seen as something that depletes our limited time and energy stores. In actuality, learning replenishes these personal and professional supplies by providing us with agency and pride, a focus for our energy and a chance to create a school in which we would all want to work and where we would want our own children to attend (Barth, 1990).

Let’s address the evidence that indicates that these conversations and the study itself may have had an impact on the participants. As mentioned earlier, several of the participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunities to discuss the issues of leadership, professional learning, and the Common Core. When combined with the evidence that building administrators do not have a forum for this kind of discussion where they can feel comfortable raising issues of concern, it is clear that this may be another gap in the district’s efforts to build a true learning organization where Team Learning and Personal Mastery are valued and nurtured. These kinds of regular, safe discussions and learning opportunities will build opportunities for sharing and reflection that may ultimately lead to strengthening the district as a whole. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that raising the issues in this case study may lead to a change in practice for the participants or others in the same situation. Although a case study focuses on the particularity of a case, “people can learn much from single cases” (Stake, 1995, p. 85).
Recommendations

What has this study taught us in our little corner of the universe that has greater implications for the broader education community? Although this particular setting for the story of a school district takes place in a Midwest suburban school district during an unpredictable time when we were embarking on the major enterprise of adoption of the Common Core State Standards, I propose that what we’ve learned will help both our own district as well as others because the research literature so clearly indicates that we are all struggling with the same issues in schools across our nation. I would like to recommend the following based on what I’ve learned.

1. Increase professional development opportunities for administrators and continue to support the learning of literacy coaches. The need for continual professional learning percolates up from every corner of every learning system in the world. Although it can often be difficult to find the time to hone our craft and keep on top of what the research is telling us about best practices, it must be part of the learning organization itself, both in expectations for participating and in evidence that new learning is being applied. Evidence for student learning is part of the new evaluation system in this state for both teachers and administrators, so it makes sense that we would also have to provide proof of our own learning as professionals. The 2009 Rand Report on Improving School Leadership speaks of the “need to develop school leaders who are capable of exercising more vigilance over instruction and developing an institutional culture that supports effective teaching practices” and suggests that states create new standards for principals and leadership training programs to achieve this (Augustine et al., p. xv). In addition to these state responsibilities, this report also recommends that districts “set clear expectations aligned to state standards of what leaders should do to improve instruction and learning” and
“provide principals with authority and incentives to be instructional leaders” (p. 5). This can be done by delivering high quality professional development and then holding the participants responsible for evidence in their buildings. In their Year 3 Report on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the Center on Education Policy concurs by stating, “Timely, ongoing, and effective professional development for teachers and principals will be critical to the successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards” (Kober, McIntosh, & Rentner, 2013, p. 1).

Professional development opportunities must include attention to best practices for both adult and student learning. It was evident in the progression of the presentations during this school year that we had benefitted from the teachers’ feedback and improved upon our product. Lyons and Pinnell remind us that in order to gain meaning, “learners of all ages must be motivated to learn and must actively engage in the process” (2001, p. 3). As the Common Core committee gained confidence and knowledge, we were able to build on what the superintendent requested of us and incorporate what we know about effective staff development. If we expect our teachers to model these best practices in the classroom with their students, then we must be sure to offer them the same in our professional learning opportunities.

This school district already offers many professional learning resources to its employees as described in my interviews and in my personal experiences. One good example was the Jim Knight coach-administrator training that was provided at the start of the literacy coach initiative. The problem in Lakeside, as in many other districts, lies in the fact that the professional learning culture is not systemic; in a systemic learning culture, the expectations for Personal Mastery and Team Learning would be consistent for all members, the learning opportunities would be
sustained, and the members would be held responsible to show evidence in their application in each position in the district.

2. Create systems of ongoing support and accountability. Along with the professional development needed to build school leaders capable of rising to the expectations of the Common Core State Standards, we must provide support that will help them achieve these new levels of expectations. All levels of leadership must feel safe enough to admit what they don’t know and to seek out what they need to know to continue to grow. Once we’ve created the safe and supportive culture of a learning organization, then we must develop a clear and consistent system of accountability where every person of the organization is responsible for carrying out the vision of the district.

All school leaders, including administrators, coaches, and teachers, must be held responsible and then hold each other responsible for continuous learning, attendance at these meetings and trainings, and application of skills to their practice. This involves developing and adopting new ways to assess the evidence and effectiveness of instructional leadership efforts both on their own and when sharing it with other staff members; in a Systems Thinking framework, this involves nurturing Personal Mastery in all members which will place them in a position to be able to contribute to the Team Learning necessary for sustained change. From my interviews, it appeared that the new state school improvement system may afford an accountability framework, but just like any other assessment tool, it is only effective if all participants are fully invested and held to the same standards by the administration. I have found a personal lesson in this study that may resonate with other literacy coaches experiencing the same challenges found in Lakeside School District. While I believe that my fellow coaches and I took responsibility for our own learning and held each other responsible for staying abreast of
current practice in the field, we may have been remiss in our own responsibility for shared leadership. Four years into the coaching initiative may seem like a long time, but in truth, we were just beginning to come to terms with where we could make the most impact in our practice and were still somewhat tentative in how we worked with our administrators. I suggest that we could have taken a stronger leadership role in encouraging our building administrators to build their own literacy knowledge so that we could more effectively team with them to build faster and more lasting change in instruction in our buildings. In truth, I believe we coaches delegated the responsibility for holding our building administrators to the people at the district level instead of taking a more proactive role in effecting change in our buildings. Based on the work of Ippolito (2009), I am recommending that, as coaches review and refine their own roles, they feel empowered to take proactive steps when reaching out to both administrators and teachers instead of waiting for them to be ready to move forward alongside us.

In the context of this research study, I further recommend that this professional development and accountability system be directly related to the implementation of the new Common Core State Standards. This must include a specific plan for holding teachers responsible for adapting instruction to meet the CCSS. “(T)he most important work that teachers, or a school, can do in order to adopt the Common Core State Standards is to become accountable to teaching whatever they are already teaching in ways that accelerate achievement” (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012, p. 121); Mrs. Dress, one of our district curriculum specialists agrees:

I think I said it at the beginning, but I think if we’re going to continue to expect teachers to step up to this, we need to expect our administrators to do the same. It needs to start with them. It needs to start with them, because how are they going to know what to
expect when they go into the classroom to evaluate this research plan or part of this research plan we come up with when they don’t even have a deep understanding of what it is? (Interview, February 21, 2013)

3. **Offer a safe forum for regular, collegial discussions for building administrators and coaches.** Most of our schools continue to function in traditional, authoritarian fashion with a top-down mentality where “internal politics, game-playing, fear and self-protection” can be found at all levels of the organization (Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991, p. 10). Lakeside schools are no different, and there was evidence of this kind of discomfort and dysfunction in my conversations with all the participants. When faced with this type of environment, most of us react in the ways we’ve been taught since we were young: focus on solving the problems instead of seeking out the underlying causes and persist in a reactive rather than a proactive state. Senge describes this as “perpetual fire-fighting mode” which leaves us with little time or energy left for learning or innovation (2006, p. xvi-xvii):

   We have learned to avoid making mistakes at all costs, which has replaced our natural curiosity and love of experimentation with a desire to provide ‘the right answer’ and to look good. We are easily threatened in a group, fearing that we might reveal our ignorance or incompetence. (p. 10)

Several of the building administrators expressed varying degrees of feeling ill-equipped for the job of being a literacy instructional leader but did not feel as if there were a safe place to talk about this or get the support they needed to build these skills. This district, and many others like it, needs to develop a vision that includes commitment to and support for each other’s learning in order to improve the learning for all.
Although the need for an improved culture did not come up in my interviews with the superintendent and assistant superintendent, I learned from building administrators that the district had provided their building leaders with a copy of Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* and a presentation on the topic toward the end of the school year under study. This suggests that the district leadership values the premise that success is founded on relationships as much as on intelligence.

Honig’s research on how the central office administrators can support principals suggests that our current models of leadership need to be redesigned based on new understandings of educational leadership, specifically, “shifting focus from compliance and business to embedded professional development and learning” (2012, p. 734). She bases her recommendations for this practice on sociocultural theory as the foundation for creating these programs because it is the relationships that seem to make a difference in sustained Team Learning. These learning community relationships are a contrast to the traditional evaluative relationships between district and building administrators and reduce the anxiety and may even nurture relationships that come with that kind of interaction. This would require modeling, demonstration, and shared and guided practice of the behaviors expected of our principals in accordance with what we already know is best practice in instruction for all ages of learners. Although this may seem a contrast to the new and more accountable teacher and administrator evaluation systems, I suggest that efforts to build trust and relationships will lay a foundation to make the evaluation systems more productive and less threatening in the end.

The potential results of this safe forum align with Senge’s vision of a learning organization and with Irvin’s literacy improvement framework that requires building leadership capacity by “distributing leadership throughout the school community [to allow] for increased
knowledge, guidance, and support for a literacy improvement area” (2006, p. 198). Based on evidence from my interviews, I posit that the literacy coach movement in the district is a strong asset that offers potential benefits for improving literacy from the administrators through the teachers and to the students. Creating a safe forum to increase administrators’ learning will generate a direct and positive impact on the leadership shared between them and coaches in Lakeside School District. These safe venues will provide opportunities for them to raise questions, discuss concerns, and engage in reflective practice about their own professional learning and frustrations. Not only does shared instructional leadership assume responsibility for building school capacity and student achievement, but it also includes sharing responsibility for failure and learning from our mistakes so that we may improve on what we do in the future. There has to be a way to support and honor risk-taking and recognize that none of us is an expert in everything, particularly where the Common Core is concerned. Our instructional leadership work is in-progress, and we are virtually building this ship as we sail it. How can we provide a safe venue for good faith attempts at improving instruction and increasing the rigor of our literacy expectations for both students and teachers? The focus, along with increasing student achievement and success, must be on what we can learn from the process and where we go next in our journey.

If administrators were given a safe haven in which to discuss their worries and be honest about what they need to improve, it could lead to targeted professional development efforts and better sharing of knowledge and resources among administrators. Instead of making our leaders feel exposed and vulnerable, this kind of honesty can lead to stronger collegiality and opportunities for what Senge calls Team Learning.
4. Involve a better representation of administrators, coaches, and teachers from the start in the planning and implementation of major initiatives. In our defense, the Common Core Standards initiative was in its very early stages when this study took place and its scope is arguably without precedence in the field of American education. It is understandable that our district, like those around the country, would need time to create a plan for its rollout and implementation, and this may include creating both long term and ad hoc committees to share the responsibilities of this major endeavor. However, I propose that if a Systems perspective were already in place in the district, more stakeholders would have been a part of the execution from the beginning. We started out with a very small Core committee in the late spring and summer of 2012, and it wasn’t until a few members of that committee began to lobby in the fall for wider representation that the district administration acquiesced. By the time the first year had come to a close, there were more administrators from elementary and middle school involved in the planning, and the middle school representation had increased.

However, in any implementation plan, just as in all phases of adoption of the Common Core State Standards, a broader planning group should be involved from the beginning if possible. In order to invite commitment, investment, and enthusiasm for this work, more voices must be heard. Joe Crawford, a former assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and currently working as a consultant on CCSS adoptions, recommends full staff participation whenever possible and cites the curriculum development work and research of Larry Ainsworth, Doug Reeves, Larry Lezotto, and Mike Schmoker as exemplars for this alignment work (2012).

At the time of this writing, Lakeside District is using Ainsworth’s models of curriculum design and unwrapping the standards to create thematic instructional units to meet the standards. There are committees of teachers building grade-level expectations that are horizontally and
vertically aligned to the new standards, so they are well on their way to creating more staff buy-in with this representative group. Historically, the district has solicited some teacher feedback on most adoptions, but it is clear that this must become a foundational part of all that they do moving forward. As Senge warns us, when the members of an organization see themselves as powerless, the organization itself has very little ability to learn; “people at all levels see themselves as disempowered; they don’t think that they have leverage to make any difference” (O’Neil, 1995, p. 21).

In the end, even the best shared instructional leadership between administrators and coaches will not be enough. While adding the layer of coaches has many benefits for administrators, students, and teachers, this also may contribute to additional insulation of the building leaders and further remove or even exclude teachers from doing the work of an instructional leader. Principals are emphatic in their support for and reliance on their literacy coaches in this school district; several have told the district level administration that they would be willing to give up a teacher if it meant losing a coach (Assistant superintendent, interview, May 15, 2013; Principal, interview, May 2, 2013). The administrators in those buildings that still had a part-time coach continually lobbied for full-time support in this area, and at the time of this writing, they had achieved their goal. So while the coaches were obviously filling an important need in the schools, we must never lose sight of the importance of continuing to build teachers’ agency and responsibility to create the schools that will best meet the needs of everyone within them. This is a primary responsibility to be shared by both the administration and the coaches. Classroom teacher leadership opportunities will attract more talented people to the field of education. Teacher leadership places the responsibility for improving education in the hands of those who live it daily and offers the potential for bringing out the best in our teachers; this will
subsequently bring out the best in our students as well (Barth, 1990; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2007b; Schmoker, 2006 & 2011). As mentioned earlier, empowering teachers as leaders may address many of the frustrations and burnout that teachers experience in our current educational culture. They will have opportunities to craft their own professional development to directly affect their efficacy in the classroom and to build the collegial relationships and the mutual respect that goes with those relationships.

5. **Continue to articulate, build and share the district’s vision.** Senge and Lannon-Kim (1991) describe what this looks like at a building level when quoting a middle school principal:

   Our goal is to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of our total system. In order to do so we need to break that total system into manageable subsystems with common focuses or purposes, like teams for each grade. Group events help maintain an understanding of the parts to the whole and address common concerns... Without a Shared Vision, people have no idea of what they are trying to accomplish by improving the system as a whole. And they will make little progress if they do not know how to reflect on their own assumptions, especially within their work teams. (p. 9)

Lakeside District already has a strong foundation on which to build in its already established Professional Learning Communities. Now it is time to take the next steps: ensure that all members invest in the Shared Vision and use it to inform their work, create monitoring and self-assessment systems to support these ongoing efforts, and hold all Communities responsible for data- and evidence-based decisions.

It was clear from my interviews that there is concern that the district administration’s plan or vision for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards lacks clarity and focus. In all fairness, we are in good company with most districts in the country at this time
(Brock, 2014; Rentner, 2013; Scholastic, Inc. & The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014), but that doesn’t absolve our school districts from continuing to craft and share a plan that will prepare their staffs to raise the rigor of instruction for all our students. An action plan that lays out the implementation goals and steps to achieve them would begin to allay the anxiety that everyone feels toward the Common Core venture at this time, as well as infuse a sense of confidence about our district and building administration as leaders. It was also clear that the responsibility for implementing this vision must be transferred to the hands of the teachers rather than continue to provide top-down directives and trainings in order to assure that a cohesive message is delivered to every building. If we want our teachers to become invested in a Shared Vision, we have to trust in and support their own ideas and efforts for implementation of the CCSS going forward.

### 6. Highlight, celebrate, and emulate the examples of effective shared leadership in your midst.

One of the ten features of the Comprehensive Literacy Model which forms the basis of Lakeside School District’s literacy instruction is to spotlight and share positive examples of the Model in practice. In the early days of the adoption, the district created lab classrooms in which the CLM was practiced with fidelity and to which other teachers could look as a model for their own classrooms. This practice was abandoned after several years because district and building administrators received negative feedback from their staffs. Instead of fostering a culture of collegial sharing, it had created a hierarchy of classrooms in which some were seen as better than others. Many of the teachers who were not designated as models themselves became resentful of the attention and resources that the model classrooms received.

It is important for us to create a culture where collegial sharing and modeling is safe and productive. The Rand Report on improving school leadership (2009) notes positive examples
where “innovative and sustainable policies and initiatives that began in the districts we studied spread to other districts and/or to state policy” and goes on to recommend the following:

States whose districts have made progress in improving school leadership should recognize these achievements and hold the districts up as possible models for others. State officials would benefit from partnering with such “lead learners” and creating mechanisms for scaling up relevant initiatives. (p. xxiii)

As with my other recommendations, this is a systems issue that must begin with the district’s top leaders and extend to every member of the organization. It will take a concerted effort to build trust and new forums for safe communication. The expectation must be that all members will engage in continual improvement and be provided with the professional development and resources to do so. As with other efforts to sustain this improvement, it must involve pressure and influence from the top and from peers for this to occur and will be part of the ongoing evaluation for everyone.

Finally, if the vision for school improvement is broad and deep enough, there will be many opportunities to recognize and celebrate different components of shared leadership within the system. Senge suggests that a Shared Vision is reinforced by recognizing early successes in pursuing the vision; as this begins to occur, “the vision starts to spread in a reinforcing spiral of communication and excitement” (2006, p. 211). This is how the district will achieve more widespread success in building its literacy vision.

Limitations

The limitations of my work reflect those that are found in many qualitative research studies. In my case, I was an emic participant in the study itself and as such, may have presented
the findings through a very subjective and possibly biased lens. Except for the superintendent with whom I had limited interactions, I had both a personal and professional relationship with the participants and considered most to be my friends in addition to being my supervisors and my coworkers. Even though I left Lakeside District at the end of the 2012-13 school year and now live and teach in a different state, I still have contact with many of the people in this study. The reader is cautioned again to consider my very personal investment in the process that was studied for this dissertation.

This study was predicated on the perceptions of administrators and literacy coaches and, as such, it must be seen as a limited or biased view of the process of implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the understanding of shared leadership. The primary data for the study were interviews that were conducted very informally, and although we had questions to guide the interviews, I allowed the interviewee to guide the conversation. This took us to unexpected places on some occasions, but it also yielded honest and reflective data in many of our detours. The reader should keep in mind that most of the data was based on self-reporting and was certainly influenced by the personal and professional context of what was happening at the time of the interview.

Another limitation related to context is the setting of Lakeside School District. Set in the suburbs of a major Midwest metropolitan area, the findings from this relatively small school K-8 school district may or may not have generalizability to urban or rural settings or even suburbs in other parts of the country.

Finally, this study was conducted over a single school year, and although my historical perspective as a long time employee of the district allowed me to fill in some of the missing
pieces, I would like to remind you that the Common Core State Standards were in the earliest days of implementation at this time. A single year of data does not even begin to tell the whole story or foresee how shared leadership in this district will continue to contribute to their adoption and implementation.

**Further Research**

The scope of my research study covers several broad areas which became a challenge for me as I struggled to stay focused on my own questions and not be tempted to chase related topics down varied and interesting rabbit holes as I wrote. The major important areas include adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards, instructional leadership, shared leadership, the roles and contributions of a literacy coach, middle school literacy instruction, and overall school improvement. The results of my own study would be further informed by additional research in these areas.

First of all, research on the new Standards is currently underway and sorely needed to help us to better understand how the CCSS will change the face of instruction and thus the experience of literacy coaching. This is particularly important with the literacy standards for content areas at the secondary level which hold great promise and challenges for change. Based on my experiences during and following the year of this study, school districts all over the country are anxious to learn more about the successes and challenges that others are experiencing in this national initiative.

Research into teachers’ perceptions of the same events would give a much broader and more nuanced view of the process. It is likely that teachers would have different perspectives about the successes and challenges of the year we spent rolling out this initiative. Now that some
time has passed and Lakeside District is beginning to create cross-curricular thematic units based on the Common Core, teachers’ thoughts on the process would most likely provide an interesting evaluation of how strong a foundation they received in the first year of the roll-out and whether this foundation helped them as they begin the process of Common Core instruction in pursuit of the standards. It is imperative that we research how effective our efforts to inform teachers of the shifts required for the new standards are, and how teachers themselves are beginning to implement these shifts in instruction.

Further research is needed to determine the factors necessary to develop strong, job-embedded professional development for school leaders in order to build their instructional leadership capacity. We need to continue to explore the ways that district level administration can provide this support for their building level administration. Administrators at both central office and building level require a conceptual model of instructional leadership before actually achieving this model in their practice. With the predicted shortage of qualified teacher candidates and the brain drain that the field is currently experiencing, it would be helpful to research the effect that this improved professional development has on teacher recruitment and retention.

In addition, the field would benefit from continued research on the impact that shared leadership and professional learning have on student achievement. At the end of the day, if we are not improving the educational environment for the young people entrusted to our care, then, in the words of one of my study participants, Mr. Joel, “It’s time to fold up the tents and go home” (Assistant principal, interview, October 31, 2012).

Finally, I found an interesting phenomenon in my research data in the difference between a leadership team made up of two females and the other teams that consisted of both males and females but were headed by a man. The evidence suggests that the female team were more
“relationship centered leaders” (Bean & Dagan, 2011; Fullan, 2007b) than the male or the mixed
gender teams. Barth describes the historical educational model as “patriarchal” and suggests that
it creates dependency rather than encouraging initiative (1990, p. 133). Further research into
gender influence in educational leadership would help provide us with information that may
inform leaders in practice, leaders in training, and pre-service providers.

**Zoom in on Year Two: One Year Later**

As I write up the findings of my research, some time has passed since the conclusion of
my study. I now live and teach in another state where I’m challenged to adapt to new people,
students, curriculum, and leadership styles. However, adoption and implementation of the
Common Core State Standards remain a constant even though I am 1, 200 miles away from
Lakeside School District. For me, as well as for many students, teachers, parents, and
administrators, this is a gift and a relief knowing that the target of my work remains the same
regardless of where I live (as long as it is within the adopter states). I have found that, just as I
suspect is true for every district across the nation, my new district is struggling with many of the
same challenges as Lakeside, but we have our own unique needs which will make the adoption
look slightly different than what is occurring elsewhere. And this is what the CCSS writers
intended (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b, p. 4).

As a way to provide closure to my study, I contacted some of the participants in May of
2014, which was near the end of Year Two of the Common Core implementation process in
Lakeside School District, and asked them for an update of where they believed the district stood
in the process and what impact they had seen in Year Two that was a result of our work in Year
One.
Along with the CCSS implementation, the district had experienced cataclysmic changes in administration during the 2013-14 year because of a change in leadership at the very top. The School Board had replaced the superintendent, most of the district curriculum department, and two of the principals from my original study group, Mrs. Lane and Mr. Rand. Two of the assistant principals from that group, Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Jade, had taken different positions in the district, and one of the literacy coaches, Amanda, had moved into a position as a new assistant principal. In the face of all those changes, it was a relief to learn that the district had continued to build on the CCSS rollout that had taken place in the 2012-13 year.

You may recall that I reported in Chapter Four that my May 2013 interviews were filled with plans as these leaders looked forward to Year Two of Common Core implementation and building upon what they had learned during Year One of the rollout. Many of those plans came to fruition despite the change in personnel; this can be attributed primarily to the commitment of Mrs. Jeffries, the assistant superintendent of curriculum, who was one of the few district administrators to remain in her position, along with the support of the literacy coaches who continue to be the vehicle for building and carrying out the vision of fewer, clearer, and higher standards in the Common Core.

All of the participants that I contacted felt that the district was in a good position for additional learning at the start of Year Two. “A lot of what we did [in Year One] really touched the surface of the work that we are doing, but at least the teachers had a basic understanding of the standards,” Mrs. Jeffries, the assistant superintendent, wrote in an email (May 27, 2014). Mrs. Adams, an assistant principal at a different school at this point, agreed with this, but added that “we were still throwing darts at what we taught as we didn’t have a clear scope and sequence or assessments designed specifically to the standards” (Email, May 20, 2014). And so under the
direction of the assistant superintendent of curriculum, the district began to align their instructional resources to the new Standards.

Year Two saw two major areas of curriculum work to support implementation of the CCSS ELA standards: delving more deeply into the standards to increase teacher understanding and creating integrated units of study aligned to Common Core Standards. At the building and district level, teachers learned more about how the standards look specifically for each grade level and how they built on each other from grade to grade. Based on the discussions and the email reports from my study participants, most of them felt that Year One had provided a strong foundation for what the teachers had to learn in Year Two. Amanda, former literacy coach and now a new assistant principal, wrote that, as a result of the initial rollout, “the teachers were prepped specifically for the shifts [and] changes, have an understanding of the standards, and the reasoning behind [them]” (Email, May 19, 2014). One of our study’s assistant principals, Mrs. Adams, who was now an elementary school assistant principal had this to say:

Because of the work we did last year, teachers were able to move to the next level of understanding the CCSS. The work we did last year opened the door for many teachers. They learned some new language and new expectations for students. They learned the different areas of the CCSS and how we are all reading teachers. Last year’s work was really the foundation to get moving and without it, our work this year would have been out of the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development, or what teachers were ready to learn at the time). (Email, May 20, 2014)

There was evidence of a more systematic approach to CCSS implementation according to another assistant principal, Mr. Green, who wrote, “Thanks to the Rising Star [school improvement] team and greater emphasis on this implementation from the [district level], I think
this is becoming a reality to the staff” (Email, May 18, 2014). He also reported that the teachers in his building had received two days of professional development from the state Department of Education consultant who had met with administrators in the early adoption days to help them begin to understand the initiative.

In addition to helping teachers build their understanding of the standards, the district created a committee of administrators, coaches, and grade-level teacher representatives to design instructional units. One of the major changes was to adopt a reading curriculum program that is described as Common Core-aligned. While such an adoption is not especially noteworthy in most school districts, this is the first time in over 20 years that Lakeside chose a published program as a way to deliver reading instruction. This choice was made by the highest administration and received mixed reviews from administrators, coaches, and teachers. This is how Mrs. Jeffries, the assistant superintendent, described it: “We recently selected an anchor text to use when writing units of study. This has been very controversial with many people…The powers that be decided that we need common materials across the district” (Email, May 27, 2014). A consultant from the publisher of this program was hired to help teachers create units based on the research on curriculum design by Larry Ainsworth. Here is how Amanda sees the results of this curriculum work:

With the new design work…our teachers now have a better understanding of the process, the idea that all lessons should be standards-based, and that assessments should drive our instruction. As these units get rolled out to teachers and implemented, I feel our teachers will have a HUGE learning curve…but I feel confident we can do it. (Email, May 19, 2014)
This positive attitude matches that of teachers across the country, according to a 2014 survey conducted by Scholastic, Inc., and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which indicated that 84% of teachers who had been teaching under the new standards for a full year were enthusiastic about the implementation (p. 2). Additionally, they found that teachers “were more likely to report feeling prepared to teach to the Common Core (79% in 2014 vs. 71% in 2013)” (p. 1).

Despite all this progress, many of my study’s participants whom I contacted a year later were going through the grieving process as a result of all the changes and loss that the district had experienced, some of which was expected and some which was not. Along with their updates on the CCSS work, they expressed some of their fears, anger, and sadness:

“This has been a difficult year here at [our school] and honestly, I can’t wait for it to be over,” when discussing all the personnel changes, Mr. Green said and then added, “I will have to see where I fit into this puzzle” (Assistant principal, email, May 18, 2014).

“End of year two has brought both you and me to new experiences. As I reflect on where I am now, I realize I had some learning to do and I have miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep” was the melancholy refrain from Mrs. Adams, who was moved to a different building with almost no warning (Email, May 20, 2014).

Mrs. Bales, a former district curriculum specialist, was describing all of the changes that had led to her resigning from her position; these changes included new administration, job losses, diminished focus on professional learning, adoption of an expensive reading program (“schlock”), and the loss of Reading Recovery in most of the elementary buildings:

Currently our teachers are more informed than administrators, and that will carry [the district] for a little while. But not for long if a culture of learning is not reignited. It’s like
Jenga - the tower was built carefully, slowly, it’s fragile, and takes very little to make it fall, quickly. (Email, June 13, 2014)

And finally, Mrs. Adams summed up the first year of the rollout, its impact, and what she learned from the experience:

Our work last year really helped me, but I’m not sure how much carry over there was to teachers. I think it depended on the administrator steering the ship. I will say this, through my work with a team of outstanding educators [during the years prior to and including the year of this research study] and my work with the Reading Recovery team this year, I have learned that a team approach must be strongly created and supported to help move thinking forward. (Email, May 20, 2014)

Well said! I couldn’t have said it better myself. While there are many talented people and strong resources in Lakeside District, the basic understanding of the team approach is missing which leads to a weak system unable to create and sustain lasting change. The commitment to systemic learning has to begin at the top and become a priority. After all, we are in school, the place where learning is our business – not just in the classrooms, but in all levels of the system. This commitment will transform a school or a school district into a learning organization (O’Neil, 1995; Senge, 2006; Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991).

Conclusion

As I reach the end of my research journey, I’ve found that using the picture book, ZOOM, as a metaphor for my study of shared literacy leadership has been a gift. By zooming in on the important players and issues surrounding instructional leadership in the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, I was able to see how the individual parts of the whole system
work together, or in some cases, fail to do so. And then, like the author did in the book, I was able to step back and look at the situation as a systems failure that can be positively addressed by the adoption of Systems Thinking.

Schools that will sustain school improvement and yield the highest benefits to students must focus on systemic improvement such as those advanced in Irvin’s and Senge’s models and create learners at every level of the system, as referenced in my theoretical conceptual model (Appendix E). Irvin et al. (2007) created their Model for Improving Adolescent Literacy with the assumption that “school improvement requires a systems approach and collaborative, informed leadership that is focused, active, and supportive” (p. 220). The changes of the Common Core State Standards can be achieved by embracing and supporting shared leadership. Fullan’s years of research show that sustainability results when leaders develop other leaders; in addition to the most important goal of increasing student achievement, the measure of a school administrator is in how many leaders you can develop who will continue to improve the system after you are gone (2007b).

We have to remind ourselves that the process of adopting the new standards is, like everything else in education and life, a work in progress. So while I’ve attempted to answer my research questions at this moment in time, looking at the same questions a year later and learning more about where the district is today, I realize that the answers have already changed. The administrators and coaches of Lakeside District are in the process of better understanding of literacy instruction because of the Common Core. Although it is obvious that the introduction of coaches has changed the leadership practice of many of our administrators, both shared and individual, the work is not done yet because we all continue to learn and grow and change. For the final time and for the right words, I turn again to Roland Barth: “Few of the tea leaves before
us suggest that public schools are heading toward communities of leaders. But the important question is not what our schools will become, but what they might be” (1990, p.145).

In the midst of the progress, frustration, confusion, and challenge that school change brings, we must all keep our eye on the prize: students who will be successful citizens making contributions to the continual improvement of our society. All of us who consider ourselves members of these communities of leaders are joined together with this common moral imperative to provide the highest level of education to every child who is entrusted to our care. This will require the commitment and collaboration of every one of us as we remember that this moral imperative is the reason we are here.
References


Appendix A

Literacy Coach Focus Group Questions

Fall 2012

- How would you describe the literacy leadership in your building? The district?
- Do your building administrators share literacy leadership with any other stakeholders? Please explain.
- What do you see as your responsibilities as an instructional leader in literacy in your building? In the district?
- What are some of the greatest influences and challenges in developing that instructional leadership? Can you think of vignettes or experiences that might illustrate these influences or challenges?
- Do you see the implementation process of the Common Core State Standards as affecting instructional leadership in your building in a positive/negative way? In the district? How or why?
- What do you think your building needs to build its instructional leadership capacity in preparation to implement the Common Core State Standards? What does the district need?

Spring 2013

- What has your part been in rolling out the CCSS this year? How have you worked with your building administrators to do this?
- What is your opinion about the shared leadership between administrators and the coach in your building? Have you noticed any change in shared literacy leadership between the administrators and coach over the course of the year of CCSS introduction?
• How do you go about building/sustaining shared leadership with your administrators?

• How has your own thinking about literacy instruction changed over this year of learning more about the Common Core? Are you doing anything differently OR making plans to do something different next year based on what you’ve learned? How have you attempted to sustain learning and focus on the CCSS in your building? What have your administrators done?

• How do you intend to continue your learning about the standards and what they mean for your building?

• What are your recommendations for more effective shared leadership between administrators and coaches?

• Do your administrators use data to make instructional decisions in your buildings? How? Are they involved in data-based decisions that go on at PLC level? Do they ever discuss student achievement data with you and/or teachers and then make decisions based on that data?
Appendix B

Building Administrator Interview Questions

Fall 2012

- How would you describe your role in terms of instructional leadership? What do you see as your responsibilities as an instructional leader in literacy in the building? In the district?

- What are some of the greatest influences and challenges in developing that instructional leadership? Can you think of vignettes or experiences that might illustrate these influences or challenges?

- What part does the literacy coach play in the instructional leadership in the building? In the district? Can you think of vignettes or experiences that might illustrate these influences or challenges?

- Can you share your thoughts on federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core State Standards that have an impact on your instructional leadership?

- What do you see in terms of support for the CCSS from the district? Challenges?

- What do you think your building needs to build its instructional leadership capacity in preparation to implement the Common Core State Standards? What does the district need?

Spring 2013

- What have you done to roll-out the CCSS in your building this year? How has the coach helped with that initiative? How have you attempted to sustain learning and focus on the CCSS in your building? How has the coach helped with sustaining that learning?

- Have you noticed any change in shared literacy leadership between the administrators and coach over the course of the year of CCSS instruction? How do you go about building/sustaining shared leadership with your literacy coach?
• How have you prepared yourself for your responsibilities in leading the implementation of the Common Core? Professional learning? How do you intend to continue your learning about the standards and what they mean for your building?

• How has your own thinking about literacy instruction changed over this year of learning more about the Common Core? Are you doing anything differently based on what you’ve learned this year OR making plans for changes for next year?
Appendix C

District Administrator Interview Questions

Fall 2012

• How would you describe your role in terms of instructional leadership? What do you see as your responsibilities as an instructional leader in literacy in the district?

• What are some of the greatest influences and challenges in developing that instructional leadership? Can you think of vignettes or experiences that might illustrate these influences or challenges?

• What part does the literacy coach play in the instructional leadership in the buildings? In the district? Can you think of vignettes or experiences that might illustrate these influences or challenges?

• Can you share your thoughts on federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core State Standards that have an impact on your instructional leadership?

• What do you see in terms of support for the CCSS from the state? Challenges?

• What do you see as your responsibilities for implementation of the CCSS in the district?

• What do you think our district needs to build its instructional leadership capacity in preparation to implement the Common Core State Standards?

Spring 2013

• What is your opinion about the shared leadership between administrators and the coaches in the district? Have you noticed any change in shared literacy leadership between the administrators and coaches over the course of the year of CCSS introduction?

• What are your recommendations for more effective shared leadership between administrators and coaches?
• How has your own thinking about literacy instruction changed over this year of learning more about the Common Core? Do you see us doing anything differently at this point OR are you making plans for what to do differently next year based on what you’ve learned?

• How have you attempted to sustain learning and focus on the CCSS in your position?

• How do you intend to continue your learning about the standards and what they mean for our district?

• How will you support building administrators in their efforts to continue to learn more about the standards and what they mean for our district?
## Appendix D

### Example of Data Analysis Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaches</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
<th>6. MS issues?</th>
<th>7. CCSS: Some of our own SHIFTS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. I wish they would be more hands on/ backing/ support  
  Coaches doing the bulk of the work  
  No carry over  
  Lack of district admin support  
  Need for vision and visionary leaders | 3, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16, 18-19, 20, 29 | Don’t have as much intervention support so coaches do more interventions 30 | Responsibility weighs heavy on coach |
| | | Helps to strengthen my position as instructional leader 30 | Getting better in presentations over the year 24 |
| | | Less impact on systemic change this way? 30 | Growing understanding – seeing their resp change 26 |
| | | Coaching across content areas 3 | Strong literacy foundation to build on 28 |
| | | Worried we would be forgotten 34 – changed over the year | Grand initiative like this puts pressure on admins to take on a stronger leadership role 27 |
| 2. What lit leadership looks like  
  “open[s] a lot more doors for me”  
  Not at district level either  
  Consistency  
  Following through/taking interest  
  Learners 40 | 6, 9-10, 17-18, 21, 22, 29-30 | 8. Looking ahead | Incorporating new resources (not using them all) 24 |
| | | More of the big picture for us (and other shifts) 27-28 | Keep at it next year 32 |
| | | Not seeing as much carryover as we’d like 32 | LA teachers grasping – content have a long way to go 34 |
| | | Changes in leadership 33 | Targeted PD, keep pressure on 37-38, 40 |
| | | Well balanced 34 | Continue work to bring teachers on board 40-41 |
| 3. What lit leadership looks like – no one seems to know  
  Most admins not seen as learners  
  District push to know the strategic plan  
  “That’s not leadership” 27  
  Lack of leadership/inconsistency at district level 31  
  “that’s what a coach does” – coach responsibilities 4, 7, 8-9  
  Coaches are learners 8, 10-11  
  Coach influencing coach  
  “Learning is a hobby for me” | 1, ii, 3-6, 7, 8, 9, 17 | | Figure it out as we go along 37 |
| | | | It took over our year JT14 |
| 4. Top down without buy-in | 5-6, 29 | 8. Looking ahead | |
| 5. Challenges to coaching  
  “The challenge is change” (end with this)  
  CCSS right now | 12-14 | | |
Appendix E

Literacy Leadership Actions/Characteristics Research Framework
(Based on the work of Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes, 2007 and Senge, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Action/Characteristic</th>
<th>Possible Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Develop and implement a schoolwide literacy action plan (related to Systems Thinking Shared Vision) | □ a vision to improve literacy instruction for all students
□ connection to a moral purpose
□ the change process
□ implementation of the CCSS
□ district/school plans for school improvement specifically in the area of literacy
□ plans to foster enrollment in and commitment to the vision
□ Other: |
| 2. Support teachers to improve instruction (related to Systems Thinking Team Learning and Personal Mastery) | □ direct work with teachers on and specific discussion of curriculum, instruction, and assessment
□ presence and participation in classroom instruction
□ constructive evaluation that results in improved instruction
□ building strong relationships
□ creating structures that allow opportunities for collaboration and learning
□ plans for knowledge building and sharing in professional development
□ connecting new knowledge with existing knowledge, particularly in relation to the shifts in curriculum and instruction resulting from the CCSS
□ literacy practices across content areas
□ strategies for differentiation
□ the use of data
□ effective use of materials and curriculum
□ assessment procedures
□ student motivation
□ technology
□ choices for self-selected topics for learning
□ Team Learning
□ personal growth and learning
□ Other: |
| 3. Use data to make decisions about literacy teaching and learning | □ clear understanding of the building’s or district’s data related to literacy assessment on both a local and state level using a variety of measures
□ collaborative efforts to reflect on, analyze, and use the results to drive instruction
□ goal setting based on student assessment data for both teachers and students
□ plans and efforts to support teacher and administrator learning in this area
□ Other: |
| 4. Build leadership capacity | ☐ leadership training  
☐ shared responsibilities for school projects and initiatives  
☐ acknowledgement of varied staff members’ contributions to school improvement efforts  
☐ decision making at different levels of the organization  
☐ Other: |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 5. Allocate resources to support literacy | ☐ recognition of needs of teachers, support staff, and students  
☐ providing “time, space, personnel, professional development, funding, technology, and materials” in an effort to contribute to the school’s literacy action plan  
☐ reallocation or creative use of resources  
☐ Other: |
| 6. Mental Models | ☐ images and assumptions about our understanding of the world  
☐ self-evaluation and reflection that leads to changes in action and behavior  
☐ being open-minded to opinions and new learning; adopting an inquiry stance  
☐ willingness to learn and change  
☐ Other: |
| 7. Systems thinking | ☐ seeking to understand the whole  
☐ examining the parts in order to understand how they work together  
☐ awareness of the process of change and improvement  
☐ integration and coherence of system  
☐ Other: |
Appendix F

Content of the CCSS Presentations: 2012-2013
The First Year of the Rollout of the Common Core State Standards in Lakeside School District

Presentation 1: September 2012

1) Exploring Change
2) Overview of the CCSS: What they are
3) Overview of the CCSS: Why they were developed
4) Defining College and Career Readiness
5) Overview of the CCSS: How they are structured (ELA and Math)
6) Overview of the presentations planned for the first year of the district rollout: Reading Standards, K-8; Literacy in the Content Areas, 6-8; Foundational Standards, K-5; Math Standards, 6-8

Presentation 2: October 2012

1) Review of the CCSS background and structure
2) Activity: Order one of the Reading Standards from K-12
3) Exploration of the Six Shifts in the English Language Arts Standards
4) Activity: Close reading of an informational article with the purpose of determining the major argument and evidence. Following a discussion, complete a Reflection sheet to review how the Six Shifts were evident in this activity.

Presentation 3: November 2012

1) Watch three videos of short lessons from the Teaching Channel and complete a graphic organizer to note CCSS instruction, what you’re already doing, what you would want to try next.
2) Closer look at the ELA standards’ strands and clusters: Reading, Writing, Speaking/Listening, Language, and Content Literacy
3) Overview of the CCSS Appendices
4) Introduction and Overview of PARCC assessment (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers)
5) Higher level thinking: Overview/Review of Bloom’s Taxonomy and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge (DOK)
6) Closer look at the Reading Standards
7) Activity: Unpack a reading standard to determine what students will be expected to do and determine their placement on the Bloom’s and Webb’s continuums.
8) Assignment: Incorporate higher level thinking vocabulary into both your instruction and your assignments in your classroom.
Presentation 4: January 2013

1) Closer look at the ELA and Content Literacy Reading Standards
2) Activity: Close reading of an informational article and creating questions using language from the Content Literacy Standards
3) Explore a resource: Monthly CCSS grade-level newsletters on the state Department of Education website
4) Assignment: Use the article and questions from today’s presentation and plan to discuss at the next presentation.
5) Challenge: Create higher level questions for texts you use in instruction.

Presentation 5: February 2013

1) Discussion and review of January presentation
2) What we can do to prepare for the CCSS
3) Closer look at the Speaking and Listening Standards
4) Brainstorming activity: Speaking and listening activities in our classrooms (chart in small groups then share through a Gallery Walk)
5) Explore a resource: Thinking and Listening Activities from our ELL (English Language Learners) Department

Presentation 6: April 2013

1) Review of the Writing Workshop model, the writing process, and the three modes of writing (narrative, informational and argumentative)
2) Closer look at the Writing Standards
3) Discussion of writing stamina and the CCSS shifts in writing expectations
4) Reading and writing reciprocity
5) Review of Informational Text Structures
6) Explore a resource: www.readingandwritingproject.com
7) Introduction of the Big 6 Research process
8) Activity: Take a piece of writing from a lower grade and revise to meet your own grade-level writing standards.

Presentation 7: May 2013 (Instead of being presented to the entire faculty as the preceding were, this was to be shared at individual team meetings during the month of May)

1) Closer look at the Language Standards
2) Review of grammar instruction that meets CCSS standards
3) Activity: Read a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., to find examples of Language Standards.
Appendix G

Sample Transcript: Literacy Coach Focus Group, January 28, 2013:

Ann, Missy (Pseudonym), and Amanda (Pseudonym)

Ann: And this is Amanda and Missy. And yeah, let’s just kind of think back to all the great stuff you told me before. But the reason my – I want to talk to you tonight is that I really do is particularly focus on where we’re at now in the Common Core roll-out.

Missy: Yeah. I think it’s interesting because, depending on where you’re at, depending on what school you’re at, our district, our district has tried to, um, tried to make it – like, not seamless – but tried to piece it together month by month. What do you think?

Amanda: Yeah, I think it’s been lots of little pieces and teachers have some of the ideas of the little pieces, but it’s not the big picture still, and that there’s still some questions there. And I think teachers are actually ready to move on and get - start doing lessons. And we’re moving a little slowly.

Ann: Wait a minute. Are you inferring that moving along and trying to create lessons now based on Common Core will help them pull the pieces together? Is that what you’re saying?

Amanda: Mm hmm.

Ann: Ok, tell me more about that.

Amanda: I guess I can only think about students and the same thing. That once you know background, you have to try it yourself. That’s kind of where we are. I know with our building, we’ve tried to do The Pathways to the Common Core book study with our PLCs, and so that’s
kind of been helping to connect some of those dots, to read that book after we’ve been presented
to with our district presentations.

Missy: It’s interesting because I remember last year, we had – we were given – my administrator
bought the Common Core flip charts for language arts, math, behavior, but really we’ve not
utilized those at all. So like they’re purchased. They’re there and like we, we could use them, but
we really haven’t had the opportunity to use them as part of our, um, Common Core PD. I think
what’s my part been – I feel like a lot of our literacy coach meetings have been utilized to kind of
fine-tooth comb and tweak a presentation that’s been put together by somebody else. So they’re
using literacy coaches to really, like, finalize that presentation. And I feel that’s been beneficial
for the Common Core committee as well as for us – and as well as for the audience - the
audience is remembered. Like, who are we talking to? Amanda, like you’re awesome. You’ll
say, “This isn’t going to work for middle school.” Or “Can we reword that slide?” I mean, you’re
very specific in some of the direction that you’ve given. So that’s been my part. My
administrators have taken the role on the lead in presenting to the staff. I’m just part of the group.
And, um, I don’t know. What do you think we need to move forward and to go next? What are
your thoughts?

Ann: Before we go to move forward, I just want to say I was curious to hear what you would
have to say about where we are right now. You in particular, Amanda, you said that it’s like
piecemeal, it’s not, like, cohesive with big idea. That’s how I feel. In my building what I’m
worried about is there’s no discussion about it away from those Early Releases. So we talk about
it for an hour or an hour and a half once a month and then there’s no carry over, so I’m afraid
about how we’re going to pull all these pieces together and get the big idea.
Amanda: We, um, what was it? Right after Christmas break, we were trying to figure out what we wanted to study in our language arts. We were looking at the Essential Skills, and I suggested, “Let’s pull out the Common Core Standards.” And teachers acted like they didn’t even know they could use them this year. So I think that is one of the signs of it being so segmented into little bits and pieces without knowing, “Oh, I can take these and own them.” They don’t know them yet. They haven’t used them.

Ann: But that was a great opportunity for you to kind of sneak in, “Look this is how we use them. It’s related to what we’ve been talking about.”

Amanda: Mm hm. And my part has been same as Missy – the lit coach meetings listening to the presentations and tweaking them, but I’ve also had some chances to step up during the presentations and do a couple of those activities, kind of with the administrator and tag-teamed it a little bit. And that helped a lot because he would say something and I would kind of fill in the blanks a little bit. So this time I think I’m more of a back seat role and so we’ll see…

Ann: So we’ll talk later and see what’s going to happen about that. It’s going to be interesting when we get to the end of the year and we compare how we feel about the presentations, how we feel that it got across when it was just building administrators, when it was building administrators and literacy coaches together, or even in some cases, where it was the literacy coach taking the main role. I don’t think that’s happening at the middle school, though, is it? I think that’s more at some of the elementary schools.

Missy: Teachers need – the question about what do teachers need – I think that they need, um, they need more work with the informational standards and the literature standards. Because what they need – what’s happening now – and I’m sure you’re all experiencing this – teachers will
throw down the term, “It’s very Common Core. It’s Common Core-like.” Because they’ve seen bits and pieces so they have a little bit of background knowledge now, but they don’t fully understand. So like this, this coming Early Release, I think what we’re asking them – to apply what they’ve learned and come up with some questions, it might be beneficial to them to really understand – like we’ve given them the Bloom’s Taxonomy, we’ve given them – we’re asking them, like those higher level questions, those ‘analyze, determine,’ – those kind of questions, this might help them get over the hump of, what is it really all about?

Ann: That’s what I’m hoping. I’m hoping and who knows until we’ve tried it? We won’t even know on Wednesday – after Wednesday. We won’t know until we see there’s carryover to them starting to pull the pieces together and saying, “Oh, now I see how those pieces fit together for what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Amanda: I think that what also teachers need, um, I’ve heard multiple teachers from different grade levels saying they’re hesitant in really and truly looking at a standard because they’re afraid that if they interpret a standard a certain way, it’s going to be mandated or said by the district-wide what that standard will look like next year. So there’s kind of, there’s a sense of fear to do that work now, because I don’t know if it’s just been the history of ‘you try something new and then it changes,’ and so there’s a little untrust- they’re not trusting of the process and so they’re hesitant in moving forward. So I think teachers need - we need to see what one of those is truly going to look like before they’re – no one’s going to – it’s hard to get teacher buy-in, at least in my building.