RESILIENCY: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY WITH
TWO HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

By
NANCY ELIZABETH COOGAN

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education

December 2012

© Copyright by NANCY ELIZABETH COOGAN, 2012
All Rights Reserved
To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of NANCY ELIZABETH COOGAN find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

________________________________________

Gordon S. Gates, Ph. D., Chair

________________________________________

Joan Kingrey, Ph. D.

________________________________________

Gene Sharratt, Ph. D.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Wherever you go - There you are

John Kabat-Zinn

I would like to acknowledge assistance received on this action research dissertation from my Chair, Dr. Gordon Gates. Without his undying support and expertise, I would not have been able to contribute to this field of research. He was persistent, yet always encouraging and trusting my instincts. I will continue to learn from his ongoing commitment to mindfulness practices through reflection knowing that this dissertation has tremendously contributed to my own practices. It should also be acknowledged that under Dr. Gates’ guidance, the committee of Dr. Gene Sharratt and Dr. Joan Kingrey were extremely helpful in guiding this action research process. Their professionalism, willingness to extend their expertise, and ongoing collaboration is valued and greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues, Thu Ament, Amy Eveskcige, Patrick Murphy, and JoAnne Fabian who wholeheartedly supported me through the challenges I encountered and provided helpful suggestions when needed. Additionally, they provided encouragement during times of distress or when I was overwhelmed.

The two adults who brought me into this world, Thomas Gaetano and Florence Josephine, have provided me the strength and courage to always make decisions based on my core convictions. My sincere gratitude and appreciation is for the time commitment and learning I received from the two high school principals in this study. Their unwavering commitment to social justice and creating a better humanity demonstrates their resilience and commitment to urban education and to serving all students. I am exceptionally proud of their high standards of excellence despite their own challenges as principals as they continue to push on for what is right and just. As a
result of this research I have developed a profound love for both as they daily fight the “right”
fight for our most marginalized children.

Lastly, I would be remiss not to mention the love of my life, Steve, and my three children,
William, Sarah, and Robert who have sacrificed time with me and allowed me the space to
pursue my aspiration to learn, grow, and apply knowledge to the field of education. Their
ongoing love and support will never go unnoticed.
RESILIENCY: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY WITH TWO HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Abstract

By Nancy Elizabeth Coogan, Ed.D.
Washington State University
December 2012

Chair: Gordon S. Gates

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore and identify how reliability and resilience were evident in the daily routines and practices of two high school principals. I also investigated the values, structures, and procedures in both high schools that assisted with or inhibited these principals to lead in ways that yielded reliable student outcomes. Furthermore, the study was structured according to action research and was used to increase the effectiveness or intentionality of their practice using organizing processes known for achieving resilience. Data collection included interviews, artifacts, and observations of two principals in an urban school district on the west coast. Findings describe both principals as open and accessible for gathering information about failures. Committed to resilience, they confronted head-on unfair representation, inequity in resources, and other disincentives that were seen to encourage poor student outcomes. Both leaders focused on developing the professional skills of their teachers as well as valued the opinions and questions of their faculty to exhibit both sensitivity to operations and reluctance to simplify. There was so much out of their control, yet both school leaders acted in tandem rather than opposition to such complexities. Recognizing and deferring to the expertise of students was a critical leadership practice in both buildings.
The demands placed on these building administrators by the central office were seen to impede resilience. A major outcome of this study was the improvement of the relationship of two administrators with their supervisor as they engaged in mindfulness collectively and individually. Conclusions of this study include the importance of informing and including principals in decisions that are made centrally and the significance of providing school leaders with autonomy and allowing for flexibility in processes as they adapt policies and programs to address local needs.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Research Problem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Study Purpose</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Research</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality and Ethics</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Participants</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured Interviews</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Reliability Organizations</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mindfulness.................................................................................................................. 36

Resilience...................................................................................................................... 43

3. FINDINGS .................................................................................................................. 49

Preoccupation with Failure .......................................................................................... 51

Talking about a mistake: Forgetting to use baseline data ........................................... 53

Failure redefined: Creating possibilities ........................................................................ 56

When there is blame: Eat pizza not hotdogs ................................................................. 57

Student safety ................................................................................................................ 60

Noting failure: A negative case of poor instruction ...................................................... 61

Commitment to Resilience ............................................................................................ 63

Students first .................................................................................................................. 66

Nurturing student resilience ......................................................................................... 68

Facilitating resiliency for staff ...................................................................................... 70

Mismanaging enrollment: Burdening teachers and forgetting students ... 72

Sensitivity to Operations ............................................................................................... 73

Making the right call: A safe call .................................................................................. 77

Curriculum: A negative case ......................................................................................... 79

Reluctance to Simplify .................................................................................................. 82

Critical colleagues ......................................................................................................... 84

More than a mission ...................................................................................................... 85
Deference to Expertise ........................................................................................................ 88

Experts: Seeing students in another light ........................................................................ 90

Flexibility .......................................................................................................................... 92

Resilience: Rewards and Challenges .............................................................................. 94

Becoming More Mindful ................................................................................................. 97

4. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 104

Study Significance ........................................................................................................... 106

Practical Significance ...................................................................................................... 106

Theoretical Significance ................................................................................................. 108

Substantive Significance ................................................................................................. 111

Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 112

Recommendation and Reflection .................................................................................... 113

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................ Error! Bookmark not defined.

APPENDIX

A. PREOCCUPATION WITH FAILURE ........................................................................... 125

B. RELUCTANCE TO SIMPLIFY ................................................................................ 126

C. SENSITIVITY TO OPERATIONS ............................................................................ 127

D. COMMITMENT TO RESILIENCE ............................................................................ 128

E. DEFERENCE TO EXPERTISE ................................................................................ 129

F. HIGH SCHOOL RESILIENCY INITIAL WINTER CONTACT LETTER ............ 130

G. HIGH SCHOOL RESILIENCY SECOND LETTERS ............................................ 131
H. HIGH SCHOOL RESILIENCY THIRD LETTERS ............................................. 132
I. HIGH SCHOOL RESILIENCY SPRING INITIAL CONTACT LETTER .......... 133
J. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ............................................................................ 134
K. OBSERVATION PROTOCOL .................................................................... 136
LIST OF TABLES

1. Student Demographics 2010-11 ................................................................................................................. 8
2. Grade 10 HSPE Results for 2010-11 ................................................................................................................ 8
3. Preoccupation with Failure .............................................................................................................................. 52
4. Commitment to Resilience ............................................................................................................................... 65
5. Sensitivity to Operations ................................................................................................................................... 76
6. Reluctance to Simplify ...................................................................................................................................... 83
7. Deference to Expertise ...................................................................................................................................... 90
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, politicians and parents have increasingly demanded more from educators. Imposing reform and reducing support through unfunded mandates and failed levies have increased pressure to do more with less. Advocates of reform claim to promote change within schools and increase student outcomes, but when policies are put into practice subsequent efforts have generally not succeeded. Indeed, the large-scale assessments used over the past decade in the United States to measure student academic performance show little to no growth (Anagnostopoulous & Rutledge, 2007; Bellamy, Crawford, Huber, Marshall, & Coulter, 2005; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007). Stringfield and Datnow (2002) lament that “It is little wonder that public and policy demands on education have escalated, as has widespread frustration with the educational system” (p. 273). Dissatisfied with the lack of progress, policy makers in the recently legislated Race to the Top have included school reorganization and closure as options for those schools possessing the poorest student outcomes.

Educators in urban settings, and in particular those at the high school level, are challenged by legislated mandates since research shows that large schools serving disadvantaged students are least likely to demonstrate high performance and most likely to evidence little improvement (Price, 2010; Rodriguez & Murakami-Ramalho, 2009; Sicoly, 2002). Findings such as these have encouraged investigators to look closely at school outcomes, the results of which have tended to identify multiple problems with federal and state accountability laws and numerous concerns over measurement of student achievement (Mintrop, 2003; O’Day, 2002). Analysts, such as Sicoly (2002), conclude that “Assessment results that are not adjusted for differences in student background may seriously distort perceptions of the relative effectiveness
of schools” (p. 17). The state of affairs is more troubling than failed policy. The complex issues inherent in assessing the efficacy of practices, programs, and operations are a serious matter for school principals charged with leading faculty and managing resources to accomplish desired learning objectives. For example, the lack of stability in school level passing rates on accountability tests make it challenging to distinguish between change as a result of school improvement efforts and short-lived change that arise given a multitude of other competing factors. Without a robust strategy for determining and initiating progress administrators and teachers are condemned to wander blindly in pursuit of one unsuccessful endeavor after another.

Current school reform focused on measuring and identifying the relationships between educational inputs and outputs to guide improvements can be seen as reflecting today’s prevailing model of management, which is based on principles of efficiency (Perrow, 1994). There is growing attention, however, to another way forward through a robust organizational leadership model that avoids many of the weaknesses evident in the policy and problems associated with dominant managerial philosophy. Public education is not so much in need of improvements through identification and institution of efficient programs and practices, according to these researchers and analysts, but in understanding and engaging in actions that increase reliability (Eck, 2011). The ideas, tenets, and arguments advanced by those who favor strengthening the capacity to operate reliably rest on findings taken from the literature on high reliability organizations (HROs).

Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) summarized research on HROs to argue that these organizations accomplish their goals by focusing on failure, maintaining situational complexity, attending to operations, deferring to expertise, and committing to resilience. The five strategies Weick and Sutcliffe list are portrayed as allowing personnel in HROs to identify and respond to
small errors that continuously arise given slight variation and ambiguity which are part of normal, everyday interaction. The processes through which misinterpretations are corrected, lapses readdressed, and mistakes amended facilitate resilience. HROs purposefully develop and refine their capabilities for resiliency according to Weick and Roberts (1992) through collective mindfulness. Mindfulness leads to the discovery of errors that may have the ability to escalate to something catastrophic. Further, an HRO will have a distinctive culture that “manifests itself in the organization members’ normative beliefs about what constitutes appropriate and safe behavior” (Klein, Bigley, & Roberts, 1995, p. 773). Organizational culture assists in providing collective knowledge to support decisions for the betterment of the organization (Bierly & Spender, 1995). Roberts (1990) discussed the attention given by management to building strong norms for reliable cultures and asserted, “These cultures must include safety, accountability, and responsibility” (p. 112). La Porte (1996) explained what is clearly distinctive of HROs is the collective commitment and culture of high respect. Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) further give emphasis to the importance of trust such that people are inclined to report their mistakes and identify potential problems, thus avoiding or reducing the potential of major accidents.

Schools are like HROs in that administrators and teachers experience unexpected problems continuously. What makes schools different, however, is that failure in HROs tends toward the directly observable catastrophic events (e.g., nuclear power plant meltdowns, airplane crashes, out-of-control fires, etc.). HROs seek to achieve accident-free performance by responding rather than reacting. An appropriate response to ambiguous or novel stimulus occurs as “In HROs, standard procedures are implemented with an assumption of fallibility, constant attentiveness to what might go wrong, and simultaneous investment in the capacity to respond differently when the inevitable problems arise” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999, p. 27).
Literature on HROs advances principles, procedures, and practices that principals and teachers can utilize to make schools more “Fail-Safe,” in particular for students (Bellamy, Crawford, Marshall, & Coulter, 2005). Bellamy et al. outline three broad areas in making their case—improving normal operations, detecting problems early, and recovering from problems quickly. Eck (2011) and Datnow and Stringfield (2000), among others, have also recognized the promise of HRO theory for addressing continuing kinds of performance challenges present in schools including poor student achievement, the achievement gap, and low graduation rates. The potential to positively influence school outcomes for youths provides the justification for the study of high reliability in educational organizations and the application of mindfulness practice for school personnel.

Action Research Problem

As the Executive Director of Cascade Public Schools (CPS) my primary responsibility is concerned with the oversight, support, and professional development of principals to ensure that their number one focus is on the instructional leadership of their school. When principals focus on supporting quality instruction in every classroom, student achievement follows (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fink & Markholt, 2011). Educational accountability and other reform mandates have transformed the principalship as instructional leadership has emerged as a central focus of the job (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leithwood and Riehl argue that instructional leadership is particularly relevant given today’s complex school environment. Instructional leadership involves providing teachers support to elevate their practice, resources to stimulate their intellectual growth, and modeling to guide their actions for change. Instructional leadership is also concerned with school culture so that patterns of discrimination and inequities are challenged. Instructional leadership is an investment in teaching and learning that in its best
instances creates a collaborative environment where teachers are focused on inquiry to change or enhance classroom and school practices. Instructional leadership yields new learning and strengthens expertise. It is a process concerned with continual reflection and refinement of teaching skills. Basically, the instructional leader, as principal, should assist in improving classroom practice to yield more positive student outcomes.

The work of instructional leader is rewarding, yet presents significant challenges as the demands on principals push and pull in multiple directions. Many school administrators talk about their work as “fighting fires.” Even non educators note how principals “describe a typical day at work, they talk about taking the heat, putting out brush fires, getting burned by decisions, stopping rumors that spread like wildfire, looking for fire where they spot smoke, facing explosive situations” (Weick, 1996, p. 565). Constantly dealing with student discipline, disgruntled teachers, or meddling parents can shift attention away from core priorities. The time principals spend on instructional leadership varies widely. Camburn, Spillane, and Sebastian (2010) gathered data from 48 principals in a midsized urban school using daily logs and an experience-sampling instrument. They found that 19% of principal time related to instructional leadership and was the second highest domain of the six they assessed. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010) studied 65 principals and observed “Principals appear to devote the least total amount of time to instruction-related activities, including day-to-day instruction tasks (6 percent) and more general instructional program responsibilities (7 percent)” (p. 502).

The Wallace Foundation (2010) funded a study aimed at understanding how urban leaders from the central office transformed their work in order to support teaching and learning. One of the five dimensions in this study focused on partnerships with school principals to deepen their instructional leadership practices. These transformation efforts focused on “Engagement
with school principals in learning focused partnerships to deepen principals’ instructional leadership or their ability to support teaching and learning improvement at their schools” (p. 3). It was emphasized that central office should not be considered “background noise,” but direct, intentional supports for principals. While these efforts are applauded, the reality of the challenges high school principals face remains daunting.

Urban high school principals face significant challenges “on the job.” Continuous demands are placed on them as a result of central office dysfunction and high stakes accountability. As a result, focusing on instructional leadership as an essential function of the job becomes less doable. Leithwood (2005) notes, “Increasingly diverse student populations served by districts and schools exemplify a third type of context demanding a unique response by leaders” (p. 16). Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010) discuss the amount of time principals spend on daily tasks across levels is consistent. There was an exception in schools with a high percentage of black students in high poverty schools where principals spent more time on administrative tasks, therefore less time on day-to-day instruction.

Two high school principals were the focus of my study: Roxanne and Fred. Roxanne was the administrator of a regular comprehensive high school named Capitol High School (CHS) and the other principal, Fred, oversaw an alternative school named Pheline High School (PHS). Tables 1 and 2 provide descriptive data for both schools as well as comparable data for the district and state provided by the state’s report card. Both schools had significant challenges and both administrators discussed the enormous social and emotional dilemmas that students bring to school daily that they must address as part of their work. For example, in CHS, 70.6% of students were qualified for free and reduced lunch which is much higher than the district’s average of 43.3%. An additional challenge for Roxanne was the substantial increase in English
Language Learners (ELL) for this school year. Over 60 level 1 students (as measured on state assessments) were currently enrolled at this school and an additional 200 new students arrived the first day of school that were not projected. This in itself presented significant challenges with the master schedule. As a result, teachers chose not to receive their preparation period, but rather teach all day without breaks for planning and preparation.

A compelling challenge for Fred was that over 30% of last year’s incoming 9th grade students were identified as special education students even though the school average from last year’s report card was 16.3%. The district’s average was 14.2%. PHS received students the comprehensive high schools had failed. Some may argue that the PHS is a “dumping ground” for students who tend to have a “laissez faire” attitude about school. An additional challenge for the alternative school was that many students arrive with insufficient credits to be “on track” for graduation. As a result, some students take additional years to fulfill the high school proficiencies in order to receive their diploma. Outsiders not understanding the complexity of the alternative setting may view their “on time graduation” rate as a data point of an ineffective high school.

For different reasons both high school principals faced challenges with the demands of the job. As their supervisor my expectations of their efforts have focused on quality teaching and that the majority of their time be spent in classrooms providing feedback for teachers in order to improve practice. Despite the impact both principals faced as a result of their student populations, their schools have outperformed the district in most categories. The impact on both schools due to unusually high special education students, unusually high ELL student population, significant free and reduced percentage of students at the regular high school and the social emotional needs of the students in general led me to question the ways these principals respond
to uncertainty and changing conditions with mindfulness and ask how I could assist them to
develop and refine their use of those strategies of resilience identified in HRO literature.

*Table 1*

**Student Demographics 2010-11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Low SES</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Graduation*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHS</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHS</td>
<td>1,301</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Actual adjusted on-time cohort graduation class of 2010

*Table 2*

**Grade 10 HSPE Results for 2010-11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Math*</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHS</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHS</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*End of Course (EOC) exams Math Year 2

Statement of Study Purpose

The continued poor performance of America’s schools in educating the next generation is
no longer acceptable. Change is needed. Yukl (2010) argued, “Leading change is one of the most
important and difficult leadership responsibilities. For some theorists, it is the essence of
leadership and everything else is secondary” (p. 299). He continued by sharing, “The
organizational approach seeks to improve human capability, commitment, and creativity by
increasing individual and organizational learning, strengthening cultural values that support flexibility and innovation, and empowering people to initiate improvements” (p. 304). Study of leadership in schools and how principals learn and develop their skills to support school improvement is thus an important subject of inquiry. The traditional approach to leading and managing schools based on principles of efficiency is under scrutiny if not possible rejection given understandings about the success of HROs through attending to reliability.

The purposes of this action research study of two high school principals were threefold. First, I explore and identify how reliability and resilience were evident in the daily routines and practices that form the majority of their work. In particular, the gathered data were used to describe how principals focused on failure, maintained situational complexity, attended to operations, deferred to expertise, and committed to resilience. It is a description concerned with deepening understanding about the nature of mindfulness in school leadership. Second, I investigate the values, structures, and procedures in these schools that encouraged or inhibited these principals from perceiving or leading in ways that relate to reliability for student outcomes. The analysis specifically examined the demands and rewards that appeared to influence the decisions and actions of the participants as they coped with “fighting fires” and providing instructional leadership. The third purpose of this action research centered on an examination of the processes used to conduct this inquiry and how participation in the study facilitated or assisted the principals to reflect, incorporate, refine, and strengthen their leadership through becoming more mindful. Through observing and conversing with principals about failure, situational complexity, operational sensitivity, expertise, and resilience their inclination and ability to lead their schools mindfully was developed and the collective mindfulness in these schools was also enhanced.
Methodology

This section focuses on the key components of the methods for collecting and analyzing data that were utilized. It is divided into five parts: action research, positionality and ethics, data collection, and analysis. The core concern in my study related to the demands and challenges of the high school principalship and how principals were pulled in multiple directions and distracted from attending to their core responsibility as instructional leader. Since I was charged with guiding the professional development of the principals with whom I work, I proposed an action research methodology. Barnett and Muth (2008) describe the practicality of action research as “developing effective practitioner-scholar leaders” (p. 3) identifying an important outcome of the project that I found particularly inspiring.

Action Research

Action research does not have a comprehensive history (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Action research is either participatory where the person conducting the study is involved in collaboration with those inside the organization or action research is done by those outside of the organization. Kurt Lewin (1957) has been credited with developing action research. He was not the first to hold or advocate for many of its principles, but given his reputation and support they became more academically acceptable and have been adopted by many of the social sciences. Lewin believed that if the social sciences were to benefit society they needed to advance knowledge that was practical for real-life situations. Further, he wanted a way for professionals to continue to learning and develop in their knowledge and effectiveness coping with real problems.

Herr and Anderson (2005), define action research as “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3). The goal of action
research is to improve practice. Specifically they develop plans of action that they implement and reflect on the effects of the implementation (Herr & Anderson, 2010). Stringer (2007) argued, “Action research provides the means by which people in schools, business and community organizations; teachers; and health and human services may increase the effectiveness of the work in which they are engaged” (p. 1). To achieve such outcomes most projects that employ the design follow a cycle of inquiry involving plan-act-observe-reflect (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Baskerville (1999) explained how the cycle is beneficial, “The fundamental contention of the action researcher is that complex social processes can be studied best by introducing changes into these processes and observe the effects of these changes” (p. 4). The cycle of inquiry thus presents a process that enables practitioners to identify the applicability of knowledge or practices and incorporate new insights into their work and profession. Herr and Anderson (2005) discuss such aspects in their argument for action research dissertations.

A dissertation forces action researchers to think not only about what knowledge they have generated that can be feed back into the setting (local knowledge), but also what knowledge they have generated that is transferable to other settings (public knowledge) (p. 10).

The practicality of action research is viewed as particularly pertinent for doctoral students in the field of education since most will not become researchers in the traditional sense but will remain as teachers and administrators. As a method, action research is well suited to the development of practitioner-scholars, a philosophy that has been embraced in many colleges of education. Barnett and Muth (2008) assert “a more viable approach to preparing practitioner-scholar leaders is to build on these professionals’ experiences by immersing them in collaborative structures for learning about and practicing research” (p. 3). The skills of research
developed through the cycle of inquiry facilitate a best practice model for decision making and improvement. Stringer (2007) clarifies “Action research, therefore, ultimately focuses on events that are meaningful for stakeholders. It provides a process or a context through which people can collectively clarify their problems and formulate new ways of envisioning their situations” (p. 204).

Action research does have limitations and has not gone without scrutiny. Baskerville (1999) stated, “The lack of generally agreed criteria for evaluating action research further complicates the publication review process. These constraints make the approach a difficult choice for academics tied tightly into the journal system of scholarly communication” (p. 25). Grogan, Donaldson and Simmons (2007) further discuss the complexities of action research: “This description acknowledges the inherent understanding that true critical reflections involve aligning reflections to theory, forming critical inquiries about policy and practice, and taking informed action” (p. 2). They further add, “Embedded beneath the contexts of biographical, historical and cultural experiences are the justifications for what we know, think believe, and feel, and our methods of making meaning of and about the environment that surrounds us” (p. 2). Thus, action research is a critically reflective process that allows for new learning about the organizational environment that may result in potential change. The goal that one gains from action research is that it informs practice, provides insight and can be transferred to the larger organization which fosters organizational learning (Grogan, et al., 2007).

Positionality and Ethics

As the Executive Director for an urban school district in CPS which serves 47,800 students, I supervise 21 principals. Specifically, I am responsible for the academic achievement of 13 elementary schools, two K-8 schools, two middle schools, four high schools and for the
evaluation of each of the principals within this region. Supervising 21 principals well is a challenge, with time being one of the key limitations on supporting each principal to the extent necessary for optimum job performance. Consequently, those who are high functioning principals have tended to receive less of my support. I believed there is room for improvement in my practice. Therefore, I wanted to understand how to better provide professional development for principals that will assist them in strengthening their mindfulness and improving the capacity for resilience within their schools.

I have occupied the role of executive director for two years. I was hired from another, smaller district where I was an administrator. My role bears further discussion given how it may have influenced not only how I behave, but also the behavior of the two principals who I have included in the study, as well as their staff. Specifically, principals and their staff may not act naturally in my presence nor may they answer my questions truthfully. Fear that I would use the information as part of their evaluation was no small question. To reduce this and related threats, I selected two participants with whom I have developed a level of rapport that they recognize that they may refuse to participate in the study without retaliation. Both participants have also received favorable evaluations from me in the past. Furthermore, I promised them that their involvement would have no direct bearing on their performance evaluation. CPS has a formal evaluation process that in many respects precludes the data I have collected. I recognized that there should be a relationship between a principal’s professional development plan and his or her evaluation, but in this case it was disconnected.

This was my second year in CPS. It took me the entire first year to build trust within my region, where there was a pervasive culture of distrust and deep rooted dysfunction between the central office and building personnel. I have done much to amend the view that those in the
central office do not understand the challenges and demands of the principalship. I was an administrator for nine years and I have drawn on this experience regularly. My guiding mantra in working with principals has been to elevate their attention to issues of instructional leadership. Prior to my arrival, part of the dysfunctional culture did not support principals evaluating poor performing teachers. This new focus has been district initiated and required executive directors to identify teachers needing support with each principal, to provide them sample plans for teachers outlining the area of focus, to take them through the probation process if necessary, and to meet with the superintendent to recommend potential non-renewals. Adding a new teacher and principal evaluation tool presented additional challenges for principals, as the roll out of both was not done incrementally, but all at once. These new tools are neither completely understood by principals nor trusted. To further complicate the new evaluation systems, compensation is attached to both teacher and principal evaluations based on a human rating system that has yet to be calibrated. For example, between the six executive directors of schools, based on an eight tier rubric from unsatisfactory to innovative ratings, we range in allocating in innovative ratings from 11% to 59% for principals in CPS. This has caused additional angst working with principals as the disparity between ratings allows for some subpar principals to be compensated based on human error and what allegedly constitutes solid evidence to support the rating. Both participants that I approached to participate may have agreed to some degree given the potential they saw in the study’s purposes for assisting them in improving their practice, which is something that they saw lacking in the district’s newly adopted evaluation models as these were not vetted in a manner that appears to be fair and just.

I paid particular attention to what I did to support them or areas where support is not provided. One example of my support for both principals was shown when I filtered low priority
or even ridiculous district requests in order to support them being more mindful in their daily activities. Some scholars refer to this as “buffering” (Honig, Coplan, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). We had in depth conversations regarding how to fix a most dysfunctional system, and what can be done immediately to alleviate initial, most pressing concerns. Both principals recognized that my role and support allowed for me to shield them from negative external influences coming from the district office or outside agencies. In other words, part of my job centers on removing obstructions or distractors from principals so they can focus on the organization and instructional leadership in order to become reliable, accountable organizations. I was reflective regarding my own biases and assumptions, and provided detailed descriptions of my methods, data collection, procedures and findings.

Since this is action research, confidentiality was not promised to the two principals. However, my observation reports, field notes, interviews, and survey data were kept in a locked cabinet. Confidentiality was maintained for other adults including administrators, counselors, teachers, staff, and parents who were included in the study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, buildings and the district because I wanted consistency. Participant names were kept separate from the data.

This research was participatory and collaborative. Furthermore, I recognized that in designing action research possible ethical dilemmas may arise when collecting data and disseminating findings. As described by Creswell (2008) “ethics should be a primary consideration rather than an afterthought” (p. 13). Thus, I shared my findings with both principals, discussed their concerns with them and arrived at an appropriate solution before proceeding further. In addition, the participants had the right to make decisions throughout the research regarding their participation. Merriam (2002) explains, “Ethical considerations
regarding the researcher’s relationship to participants are becoming a major source of discussion and debate in qualitative research, especially with the growing interest in critical, participatory, feminist, and postmodern research” (p. 29).

Consent from both high school principals for this study was obtained. In addition, the former superintendent granted permission to use both high school principals for this study. Both principals were provided background information regarding the purpose and intended outcomes for this study once the proposal was approved. Since the study qualified as exempted, verbal consent was all that was necessary.

I submitted all information to the Washington State Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Creswell (2008) gives emphasis to following three principles as guidelines: “respect for persons (their consent, their right to privacy, and anonymity), beneficence (weighing the benefits of research versus the risks to individuals), and justice (equity for participation in a study)” (p. 158). Following these guidelines for the purposes of this research assisted in evaluating the ethics of my study.

Key Participants

I selected purposefully the two key participants for this study. One was an alternative high school principal and one was principal of a regular, comprehensive high school. These two principals had challenging schools for different reasons. One principal had a high percentage of free and reduced lunch and an extremely diverse student population. The other principal had an incredibly high percentage of special education students in the ninth grade, and had students who failed for some reason in our comprehensive high schools (often arriving at the alternative school with limited credits toward graduation).
Both schools shared an ethos that is uncommon within the schools I oversee. Both schools had safety nets for students that are not commonly found in high schools, as both principals are mission driven and social justice issues are openly discussed with faculty. The participants I selected viewed their leadership through a social justice lens. Part of this may be because both leaders have earned doctorates and are scholars themselves. One principal’s doctoral studies focused on the voices of urban principals in Chicago, while the other principal’s dissertation focused on the role and responsibilities of white administrators and teachers who work and teach in schools where the students of color are the majority (i.e., minority majority schools).

In addition to the above, I planned a study that included both male and female principals. Women are an underrepresented group in the high school principalship. Even in CPS there are few women principals who administer these large schools.

The final criterion for the principals I selected was tenure. I selected participants who had been in their building for a number of years and were experienced principals. The years of service in the principalship (one with 9 years and the other with 18 years) provided credibility and experience that they were able to draw upon for explaining their perspective and offering insights useful for the development of other administrators.

Data Collection

As the Executive Director I had a direct relationship with both principals who were studied. Both principals were approached and provided an explanation of the purposes of the study. Data collected for this study were gathered through surveys, structured interviews, and observations. The procedures used for gathering data for each method will be explained below.
Surveys. The target population for the surveys were both principals and high school teachers who work in each perspective building. Prior to the pre assessment both staffs were sent emails introducing the action research project, identifying the purpose of the assessment, and inviting them to participate. The purpose of the surveys were explained as assessing the capacity for resiliency within both schools. Specifically, the survey employed the five audits developed by Weick and Sutcliffe (2009) including: (1) preoccupation with failure, (2) reluctance to simplify, (3) sensitivity to operations, (4) commitment to resilience, and (5) deference to expertise (see Appendix A-E). Before explaining the audit and kind of information gathered, I noted that the language on the audits was changed to reflect the school context. For example, the term “organization” was replaced with “school,” “supervisor” with “administrator,” and so forth.

The first audit (Appendix A) measured the capacity within each school for detecting failure. The more an organization discusses failure and the location of its failure, the more it is proven to be a mindful practice. The goal is for organizations, and in this case school, to have a healthy preoccupation with failure. In HROs the culture is such that there is a commitment to what needs to happen and what must never happen. The end result is not necessarily profitability in organizations, but a focus on safety, organizational routines, and strong relationships. HROs pay close attention to weak signals that may be symptomatic of larger problems. Just as safe operations is a prerequisite for HROs, high academic achievement is a prerequisite for school success and it is unacceptable for schools to yield success for some students, yet fail others.

A second instrument used is Weick and Sutcliffe’s (2009) Reluctance to Simplify (see Appendix B) audit. Reluctance to simplify is what distinguishes HROs from other organizations. This audit identified the degree to which diverse views within the schools are supported, preventing what Weick and Sutcliffe refer to as “blind spots.” Reluctance to simplify
encourages those within the organization to look at those with divergent viewpoints, as this allows for more variety resulting in a more mindful system and never taking anything for granted. When done well, there is mutual respect within the organization and those with diverse views are welcomed and seen as contributing partners in resolving potential problems. Attributes of this audit included people listening carefully, trusting relationships, encouraged questioning, and showing great respect for all members of the organization.

*Sensitivity to Operations* (see Appendix C) is an additional assessment that focuses on correcting failures and mistakes that often go unnoticed or that could lead to potentially larger problems. As a result, HROs make adjustments keeping these failures from accruing. In the case of schools as leaders, principals are on the front line sharing information about what is actually happening within the operations of the school and making ongoing adjustments as a result of “cues” that things aren’t going right. Similar to HROs, school personnel may also detect small errors prior to them accumulating into larger concerns.

*Assessing Your Firm’s Commitment to Resilience* (see Appendix D) focuses on managing the unexpected and anticipating errors that may occur. People work daily with surprises within HROs, but the commitment to resilience focuses on error containment. How prepared are those within the organization to manage unexpected events and how do they bounce back from those errors? Those within HROs have a large repertoire of technical skills which allows them the ability to be resilient during unexpected times. This commitment to resilience is what Weick and Sutcliffe (2009) refer to as “a capacity to use knowledge in unexpected ways” (p. 99). Similarly, schools have complex systems that are supposed to function under strict reliability criteria in order to reduce failure within the confines of the school. In both HROs and schools this would
require technical competence, ongoing training, flexible decision making and authority, and the rewarding of error reporting (Frederickson & LaPorte, 2002, p. 34).

The final audit, *Deference to Expertise* (see Appendix E), assesses the degree to which experts are employed by decision makers. HROs use this analysis to identify unexpected problems and shift their decisions and authority to those in the organization with expertise. This is what HROs refer to as “loose-tight coupling.” Within HROs one person does not make all of the decisions, but rather decisions migrate to all levels of the organization in order to solve a potential catastrophe. This audit cannot be emphasized enough because it leads to accountability and a responsiveness to where to find help within your organization.

With the exception of *Assessing Your Firm’s Sensitivity to Operations*, which simply has agree or disagree responses, all other surveys use a Likert type scale made up of three possible responses including: 1(not at all), 2(to some extent), and 3(a great deal).

I used the pre-assessment data, which were collected in January of 2012, as a baseline. I proposed to administer the assessment in May the following semester as a post assessment. The scores on the pre-assessment were high such that in consultation and approval by my dissertation committee I elected not to gather a second round. The concern centered on issues of regression to the mean. The potential for scores on the second administration to confound rather than illuminate the nature of the work that had been undertaken in my opinion was too great.

The surveys were administered via email survey using the Skylight Survey Matrix to all faculty and staff. The message was sent to work emails through a web-embedded access code. Survey respondents who did not respond to the first invitation were sent a follow-up reminder and thank-you one week after the initial mailing. The following week a second reminder was
distributed. See Appendix F-I for three contact letters. Following these procedures the response rate from PHS was 56% and CHS was 61% respectively.

**Structured Interviews.** A series of three structured interviews were scheduled during the data collection period beginning in January 2012 with both high school principals. Open ended questions were asked so principals could voice genuine experiences unimpeded by the researcher. These structured interviews were scheduled to take two-hour increments, but often went longer and were guided using the results from the pre-assessment audits. These interviews took place in the principal’s office or an off-site location, whichever was more favorable, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Structured interviews probed on the following research themes: (a) the five strategies of HROs, (b) employing resiliency with the demands of the job, and (c) how leaders employ mindfulness in a school setting.

The initial structured interview sought to understand pertinent information about their background (See Appendix J). Questions such as, “Tell me about yourself and how you came to the decision to become a high school principal” and “What words best describe your school, your staff, your students?” did this. Since I had an established rapport with both principals, the following questions allowed for me to gather additional information regarding their leadership such as, “How do you go about delegating?” “How does conflict play a role in your job?” and “Describe the relationship between you and the district and between your school and the district?” These questions provided insight as to their challenges as leaders and brought understanding to the rationale for why these two participants have been in the principalship for so long despite the demands of the job.

The pre-assessment baseline data was shared with both principals during a second structured interview in March. This quantifiable assessment further examined where people
agree and disagree and was used to identify where principals assisted in developing more mindful school operations. Once the results were calibrated, I met with each principal in order to understand and begin to make sense of the potential differences in their responses compared to that of their faculties. Questions guiding my discussion included: (a) Looking at the results what surprised you most? (b) Is there unexpected good news or anything alarming? (c) How will you benefit by sharing the results with your staff? (d) How do you “buffer” or protect your staff from extraneous tasks? (e) What would be required for a school to be considered “highly reliable?” (f) Can you give me an example of when you enacted mindfulness with your staff? (g) Describe what happened the last time you demonstrated resiliency as principal? (See Appendix J). If a principal responded with single answers or minimal information, a follow-up response asked why they believe that to be the case. My hypothesis was that this heightened awareness assisted with their understanding of their faculty, and as a result, strengthened their mindfulness as a school leader. This baseline data was used to triangulate other data once the principal interviews were conducted and recorded, and themes began to emerge from fieldnotes and observations at regional meetings and district leadership meetings.

The baseline data additionally helped to formulate supplementary questions, as well to ask principals during the other structured interview as well as during observations and one on one visits. During the second structured interview, questions were identified based on the pre-assessment data from their faculty which was added to the questions already developed in Appendix J. During our monthly visits it was important to focus on their current concerns as this provided information on how they handled concerns which may lead to more resilient practices. Each visit was grounded in the information that I received from the initial pre-assessment used to guide these discussions. Were they focusing on failure, attending to operations, deferring to
expertise, committing to resilience, and welcoming diverse experiences? This part of my visit was transcribed and checked for accuracy.

**Observations.** Additional data collected for this study included monthly observations of principals in their school settings where each administrator, students and staff were observed during two-hour time increments (See Appendix J). I scheduled one-on-one visits bimonthly with each principal at their school sites to gather field notes through the rest of the school year. During these visits I observed student interactions in hallways, staff interactions with administration, and staff interactions with students. During these less formal visits I focused on how principals made decisions, what they did that demonstrates resiliency in their practice, how they used the expertise within the organization when they are “stuck?” and, were decisions made that demonstrated mindfulness with their staff, their students, or the community? When meeting one-on-one with principals we typically observe classrooms, calibrate what feedback we will be giving the teachers whose classes we visit, and debrief any heightened concerns they have. When visiting schools I paid particular attention to how they managed unexpected events, how they saw problems in their classrooms: Are all students engaged, are they committed to addressing this, how do they talk with students about failure, are they negative with students or is there mutual respect, and are they attending to all students’ needs? Since my occupation focuses on principals as instructional leaders it was important to note the descriptive feedback that is provided for teachers in order to elevate their practice. I jotted field notes for these meetings and of our discussion. All field notes during observations were transcribed.

Similar observations for both principals occurred at monthly regional meetings and district leadership meetings. Field notes were also taken at these meetings.
**Data Analysis**

Individual response to the audits collected via Skylight were downloaded and input into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Total scores were generated for each of the audits, following Weick and Sutcliff’s (2009) guidance. Each item response per audit was added together. Descriptive statistics were generated for both schools on the total audit scores (for each of the five audits) and for each individual item. Analysis occurred separately on the data collected for both schools. Items and audits on which there was a high standard deviation or low standard deviation were identified. Items and audits on which there is a high or low mean, median, or modal responses were also identified. Analysis of the pre-assessment data to some degree guided questions asked of both principals during the interviews or bimonthly visits.

Data were gathered and analyzed over an academic year. I visited schools, observed principals, collected artifacts, formally interviewed both principals, and collected data from regional and district leadership meetings. Both formal and informal interviews were conducted as my contact with both principals, being their supervisor, was ongoing and deliberate. Most data analyzed were gathered as the result of formal interviews which lasted a minimum of two hours. These interviews were taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy when there was question regarding content. During these interviews principals were asked questions pertaining to their background, mindfulness, and resiliency. Principals were also asked how they “made sense” of the pre-assessment audits conducted with their staff. Specifically, principals were asked questions that describe the culture in their schools and how they distribute leadership, conditions of change, and how they handle or resist conflict. The purpose of these
questions were to understand the potential for mindfulness, resiliency, and the constructs of HROs as they pertain to schools.

The transcribed data were coded for themes. All of the data were assembled into various incidences as they pertained to one of the five processes for mindfulness; preoccupation with failure, commitment to resilience, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, and deference to expertise. Incidents were shared by each principal as they pertained to each audit explaining how principals and/or their staff exhibit these characteristics in their schools. Patterns were established based on the characteristics of HROs as they relate to the schoolhouse where demands and rewards were visible in schools that required both administrators to attend to. Inferences were drawn from these experiences that allude to mindfulness in secondary principals that yield more resilient practices. An additional analysis was conducted in order to provide insight relevant to principals coping with the demands of the job.

Lastly, trustworthiness was established by a rich description of their stories which supports the findings that “are worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). Credibility pertains to participants being able to “trust the integrity of the processes” (Stringer; 2007, p. 57). Participants are encouraged to discuss the issues of the problem that is being sought. Transferability refers to those who were part of the study recognizing that the study may be transferable to others in the organization. Dependability refers to data collection and analysis, and confirms that the action research process has been followed (Stringer; 2007, p. 59). In this inquiry, trustworthiness was enhanced through the strategies detailed below. The triangulation of the data which includes fieldnotes, observations, and interviews all contributed to the trustworthiness and validity of the analysis.
These different data sources enhanced the accuracy of the study and allowed for examination and evidence to support the identified themes (Creswell, 2008, p. 266). Noted by Bogdan and Biklin (2007) “multiple sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you were studying” (p. 116) and in this case how principals improve their capacity for mindfulness and how they are resilient leaders in the face of the challenges of the principalship.

Chapter Summary

Principals play a significant role given their responsibilities in achieving high reliability outcomes in schools. The work is challenging given the complexity of the schoolhouse, which often requires improved performance with limited resources. Schools are complex systems and not necessarily understood to the extent needed to support their efforts. We need a process that will increase the reliability of our schoolhouse. This action research study contributes to the literature as it relates to high reliability organizations and how principals go about their work to achieve such outcomes.

Chapter two of the dissertation provides a review of literature concerned with high reliability. Chapter three offers the study findings to address the three guiding questions and outcomes for the action research. The last chapter of the dissertation provides a discussion of the study’s significance, limitations, and closing remarks pertaining to the recommendation and reflection of the work that occurred over the year as undertaken given the purposes of this study.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on high reliability organizations (HROs) generally focuses on entities such as aircraft carriers, nuclear power plants, and emergency response units that have successfully avoided creating or succumbing to catastrophe given the complex nature of their work, technology, or environment. These organizations have systems with catastrophic potential. There are a number of characteristics about the performance of HROs day-to-day operations which include operating complex and demanding technologies without major catastrophes while preserving high peak production (La Porte, 1999, p.61). Scholars describe the difference between accidents versus incidents and the importance of “reducing potential damage to humans” (Perrow,1999, p. 66). Accidents in HROs can produce devastating outcomes. Perrow further discusses,

An accident is a failure in a subsystem, or the system as a whole, that damages more than one unit and in doing so disrupts the ongoing or future output of the system. An incident involves damage that is limited to parts of a unit, whether the failure disrupts the system or not (p. 66).

HROs are viewed as able to achieve successful outcomes given mindful decision making and resilient practices. The literature reviewed in this theoretical framework came from research and theory pertaining to HROs. I begin this chapter with a section that reviews literature on organizing as concerned with high reliability. Included in this discussion is a definition of high reliability as well as a number of principles and strategies identified in research that have been attributed to achieving such outcomes. Following this discussion, I provide a more detailed examination of mindfulness as presented in HRO literature. The third section of the chapter
describes theory and research pertaining to resilience. Finally, I offer a chapter summary that includes insights and connects the discussed concepts to this action research.

High Reliability Organizations

HROs focus on minimizing error during periods of peak demand, improving continuously on operations, and identifying problems prior to their escalation. HROs detect problems early, make adjustments and recover prior to escalation that could potentially lead to error. There is a “reporting culture” and the organization is alerted by “near misses.” HROs have systems of redundancy that lead to more reliable outcomes as “checks and balances” allow for detection of error. They demonstrate organizational adaptation based on the needs with features of redundancy in the system (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003). These complex organizations have a cognitive infrastructure which allows for adaptive learning yielding more reliable performance fostering effectiveness “under very trying conditions” (LaPorte & Rocklin, 1994, p. 221). In applying these strategies they tend to recover quickly from mistakes and avoid catastrophic predicaments. Characteristics of HROs include their complex technologies, risk potential, high interdependence, employee training, redundant systems, and flexibility (Perrow, 1984; Roberts, Stout, & Halpern, 1994). In addition, HROs have an organizational culture that allows for distributed decision making. Scholars even suggest that organizational culture is perhaps the source of reliability (Frederickson & LaPorte, 2002; Weick, 1987). As a result of the catastrophic event on September 11, 2001 “insider threat” must be considered and may hinder high reliability and therefore threaten the inside culture of the organization (Sagan, 2004). One cannot safely assume that inside individuals in high reliability organizations “are immune to penetration by domestic or foreign terrorist organizations” (Sagan, 2004, p. 939). This should be an additional consideration when looking at organizational culture as it pertains to insider threat.
Complex interdependencies allow for HROs to have systems that continually monitor and adjust, as all members understand that reliability is their primary concern. As a result, the culture in HROs encourages confrontation in order to enhance reliability (Klein, Bigley, & Roberts, 1995). Culture in high reliability systems contains worker autonomy, independence, open communication and decentralization meaning that decisions are a shared responsibility within the organization (Perrow, 1999). This shared responsibility leads to an unwavering emphasis on safety. Reliability for HROs relates to the public’s expectations that errors are limited and normal operations are consistently improved. Despite these expectations, when catastrophes do occur, the public tends to jump to the most convenient explanations of fault rather than creating conditions and evaluating the success of other HROs while determining the potential risks that may occur (Perrow, 1999). There are social structures within organizations that scholars refer to as “routine nonconformity” (Vaughn, 1999). Routine nonconformity refers to unanticipated outcomes within organizations that yield adverse effects or suboptimal outcomes such as a disaster. These disasters are costly, public, unexpected and usually of a large magnitude. The culture within these organizations is worthy of discussion. While culture is one aspect of the organization’s environment, it has the potential to produce a violation of the organizations goals that justify organizational deviance, or support openness in order to discuss mistakes, share decision making, and collectively make sense of potentially harmful outcomes. (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Vaughn, 1999). Scholars further argue that culture may not be sufficient, but “restricting the catastrophic potential of our enterprises is of higher priority” (Perrow, 1999, p. 360). While culture is important, in tightly coupled systems, culture should equate to high reliability operations as a priority restricting the potential of catastrophe and is considered monolithic. Scholars further caution that organizational culture cannot be substituted for
organizational power specifically when discussing the *Challenger* accident. “Interpretation minimizes the corruption of the safety culture, and more particularly drains this case of the extraordinary display of power that overcame the objections of the engineers who opposed the launch” (Perrow, 1999, p. 380). This scholar concludes that this exercise in organizational power yielded catastrophic results. It is further suggested that organizational hierarchies often quell mistakes in order to protect individuals or the organization as a whole (Vaughn, 1999). This leads one to believe that those in power may be part of a coercive system. There are organizational hierarchies present in HROs, but those in command make the decisions when the potential for catastrophe and loss of human life is present.

In the medical profession, the organizational culture further disallows open dialogue when errors occur. Admitting to uncertainty in this profession is rarely part of the organization’s culture, yet one may argue what some may consider imprudent behavior may lead to learning for doctors and reduced errors for patients. Medical malpractice notes that doctors prevent open discussions and acknowledgement of errors. “Hospital lawyers warn doctors that, although they must, of course, tell patients about injuries that occur, they are never to intimate that they were at fault, lest the ‘confession’ wind up in court as damning evidence in a black-and-white morality tale” (Gawande, 2007, p. 57). Furthermore, scholars conducted an analysis of errors from three Massachusetts teaching hospitals with a random sampling of 38 surgeons. They identified errors based on weekly morbidity and mortality (M & M) cases. These scholars concluded, “The incidents reported were serious, with one third resulting in permanent disability and 13% in death, and we were able to identify important underlying patterns in the errors” (Gawande, Zinner, Studdert, & Brennan, 2003, p. 619). Despite that mistakes happen and errors occur, surgeons tend to think of them as aberrant and uncharacteristic of normal operations. Cultures of
safety in healthcare organizations are being scrutinized and reviewed as a necessary component as errors and near misses are not openly discussed. The rigid culture does not support a more learning-oriented culture around safety as this would upset the established routines and structures that are commonplace. Physicians are expected to work in a culture that demands efficiency under trying conditions with significant pressure in order to make timely decisions for their patients (Hoff, Pohl, & Bartfield, 2006). Part of the HRO culture encourages the reporting of errors as a characteristic of these organizations as it may be the system’s last trial. With regard to medical malpractice and the culture in medical organizations, errors prevent doctors from acknowledging them and discussing them in order to elevate their practice. Mistakes are viewed as someone else’s fault and are blameworthy. Physicians are challenged by openly discussing mistakes as a result of the healthcare culture due to fear of malpractice. Medical mistakes are considered exceptional, and uncommon (Gawande, 2002; Paget, 1988). The discussions of these types of mistakes occur “off stage,” is uncommon, and considered an interference. In some sense the medical practice share some characteristics of HROs as it is technical in nature, expertise is needed at every level of the organization, improvisation occurs, and errors have the potential to materialize into the loss of human life; the greatest catastrophe.

School organizations must operate in a less insular manner as near misses have the potential to lead to student failure. Detecting students who are struggling early allows for system adjustments and interventions which may be one characteristic prevalent in HROs for schools to consider. This type of “detection and recovery require a high degree of collaboration and shared responsibility” (Bellamy et al., 2005, p. 400). It also requires vigilance as there is an assumption or skepticism that something or someone will always fail. Scholars have referred to this as a need for mindfulness knowing that problems will and do occur at any time (Sutcliffe, 2001; Langer,
1989). When signals of trouble occur, those in mindful organizations identify early warnings and manage unexpected events as they detect them early (Eck, 2011).

Psychologists have had many insights regarding organizational power and the patterns that contribute to what is referred to as organizational deviance or misconduct (Vaughan, 1999). As a result, the organizational culture has implications and clearly connects to hierarchies and the political environment and there is evidence that power and politics contribute to suboptimal conditions that lead to accidents (Sagan, 1993). In medicine, the power of surgeons cannot go unnoticed. Mistakes in medicine are not uncommon despite that decisions are supposed to be based on evidence (Gawande, 2002). As uncertainty is a trait of HROs, there is still an abundance of uncertainty in medicine despite the increase of complex technologies, redundancies in systems, and the necessity of great expertise.

Reliability is an important characteristic of healthcare organizations, HROs, and schools. It is achieved in part though attention to identification of problems before they escalate toward failure (Bellamy et al., 2005). Weick et al. (1999) define reliability as “the capacity to continuously and effectively manage working conditions, even those that fluctuate widely and are extremely hazardous and unpredictable” (p. 86). It pertains to the organizations effectiveness under very trying conditions. These scholars further note “the notion of repeatability or reproducibility of actions or patterns of activity is fundamental to traditional definitions of reliability” (p. 86). Other scholars discuss the importance of implementing a formula well and being consistent with it within an organization and the importance of systems that produce results based on consecutive trials that produce designs without failure. The efficiency of an organization or system is, in fact, dependent of its parts (Sitkin,1992; Hustad, 1993; Landau, 1969). There are additional requirements placed on schools to perform reliably. Transferring the
principles from HROs to schools may increase reliability (Eck, 2011). The idea of a fail-safe schools framework identifying functions for schools to achieve high reliability by improving normal operations, detecting problems early, and recovering or changing course as a result of identification is key (Bellamy et al., 2005). It has been argued, however, that traditional definitions of reliability are misleading and ignore cognitive processes that enable HROs to understand and observe fluctuations in routines that allow for ongoing readjustments. These ongoing adjustments are also made in residency settings in hospitals. Residents working in hospitals must be able to use information quickly in order to make appropriate, timely judgments for their patients (Hoff, Pohl, & Bartfield, 2005). Redundant systems have the potential of decreasing reliability if those within the organization avoid duties as there is an assumption that someone else within the organization will take care of them (Sagan, 2003). The literature discussing HROs represents organizations that support reporting of errors, having effective responses when a crisis occurs, and avoiding complacency. The overlaps within the organization yield more reliable systems. If there is the potential for catastrophes or significant failures, HROs allow for flexibility within the system by adjusting from tightly coupled to a more loosely coupled organization (Perrow, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). The cost of error is high in complex, tightly coupled systems (Landau, 1969). In HROs when the potential for disaster exists the final decision is made by those ranked at higher levels of the organization. Similarly, in healthcare organizations a hierarchy exists for those having extensive experience as providing final decisions when error does occur (Hoff et al., 2005).

Scholars of HROs define a tightly coupled system as one where all components are interrelated and there are time sensitive processes and minimal buffers (Perrow, 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). “Tightly coupled organizations are complex, more invariant and very dangerous
thus unable to adjust to changing conditions” (Perrow, 1999, p. 93). If systems are so tightly coupled, failures become incomprehensible and have the potential to lead to catastrophe. The “right conditions” should be present in tightly coupled systems that may yield catastrophic results as noted in The Union Carbide Plant in Bhopal as having optimal conditions despite no warning signs to the people in India resulting in thousands of deaths (Perrow, 1999). This was not one failure in isolation, but many safety devices coming together in unexpected ways. In the account of Three Mile Island (TMI), the challenges of tightly coupled systems are noted as being prone to accidents during the normal course of operations because of the inability to move from complex to linear systems (Perrow, 1984). Interactive complexity presents additional challenges. Scholars further note “technological tight coupling is dangerous in the presence of interactive complexity, unless it is mediated by a mutually shared field that is well developed” (Weick & Roberts, 1993 p. 378). Tightly coupled systems have the ability to cascade quickly resulting in entire systems failure. In contrast, loose coupling occurs in organizations when systems are in place for allowing substitutions to occur “in the moment.” In defining loosely coupled organizations problems have the potential of being converted to other problems or go unnoticed resulting in no solutions at all (Vaughn, 1999). This definition does not imply disorganization, but coherent structure and processes to accommodate “in the moment” challenges (Perrow, 1999). To address the demands and complexities of HROs there needs to be a combination of tight and loose coupling of components with the system for these organizations to operate successfully due to the potential hazards affiliated with their technology and products. An example of how HROs use “loose” and “tight” coupling is when and how they distribute information. HROs commonly disseminate decision making across the organization in order to obtain expertise to understand and resolve a potential problem. However when the problem has
significant results that could lead to fatalities or catastrophes, the decision making power lies within the higher ranks and those who have developed expertise from “near misses.”

HROs require continual operational reliability in order to avoid catastrophes in a very complex system. HROs are distinctive and focus on failure versus complacency. The challenge comes when organizations and systems are incredibly reliable. Those organizations focus on efficiency and success. In non HROs cognitive processes are not developed and the potential for members to become complacent increases. The benefit of having both tightly and loosely coupled systems within HROs provides the necessary “checks and balances” that can off-set or mitigate this tendency. They encourage learning, create multiple systems of redundancy, and disallow complacency. Redundancy refers to duplications or overlaps within a system (Landau; 1969). Furthermore, scholars discuss, redundancies exist whenever there is an “excess or superfluity of anything” and can produce high system reliability despite having the presence of unreliable parts. (Landau, 1969; Sagan; 1993). Scholars agree that redundant systems account for reliable performance (Kendrau & Wachtendorf, 2003; Landau, 1969; Sagan, 1993; Weick et al., 1999).

Redundancy is common in organizations that are complex and hazardous where safety is paramount due to the potential of disaster. The use of redundant systems in order to improve safety can have the potential to “backfire” (Sagan, 2004). This scholar suggests in redundant systems organizational risks may increase.

In HROs diverse perspectives increase the chance that subtle changes can be recognized or different points of view will be brought into focus. Ambiguity is not treated as an enemy but as a teacher that can help employees develop mindfulness as they work in very complex and interactive environments. They are distinguished as they encourage reporting error, and pay
attention to situational awareness that leads to adaptive changes yielding organizational learning. As such, the nature of organizational learning as discussed in the literature rests on qualities that have been summarized under the label of mindfulness.

Mindfulness

The construct of mindfulness is defined by scholars to include examining various, alternative perspectives, maintaining mental functioning that is continuously updated in order to have a deeper understanding of perspectives, and being truly present and sensitive to the present perspective of others (Burpee & Langer, 2005; Carson & Langer, 2006; Langer, 1993; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). “Mindfulness allows for inquiry, interpretation, and action. It is “a persistent mindset that admits the possibility that any “familiar” event is known imperfectly and is capable of novelty” (Weick et al., 1999, p. 88). “Thoughtful inquiry searches for appropriate conditions and encourages playfulness with ideas” (Hoy, Gage & Tarter, 2006, p. 238). Mindfulness is deliberately attending and reflecting in order to deepen one’s understanding of the perspective of others. It is not considered a passive process but an examination of the present (Woods, 2009). Mindful organizations allow the identification and correction of errors, promote innovative practices, allow for collaborative structures, and support the existence of improvisation (Eck, 2011). As such, HROs are flexible and responsive organizations that employ mindful practices where lessons are learned, reflected upon and reviewed where changes are made as a result.

Mindfulness focuses on the importance of authenticity, self-acceptance and noticing complacency. Complacency occurs in organizations as routines become fixed or set through daily practice. Individuals who practice mindfulness are not only present in the moment, but fully engaged in their environment. Scholars profess, “Mindfulness is as much about the quality of attention as it is about the conservation of attention. It is as much about what people do with
what they notice as it is about the activity of noticing itself” (Weick et al., 1999 p. 90). Scholars give emphasis to school mindfulness as “heeding early warnings of trouble” equating this as a characteristic of high reliability organizations (Hoy et al., 2006). Much of the literature speaks to mindfulness as a capacity of consciousness, attention, being flexible, and having the ability to “break set” (Brown & Cordon, 2009; Hoy et al., 2006). It is a sustained focus, but most importantly the quality of one’s attention allowing for deep discovery of an experience. It is a cognitive process that brings attention to moment to moment experiences. In highly complex organizations promoting less reactivity to what has occurred and an increase in efficiency during times of distress (Brown & Cordon, 2009). The opposite of this construct is that of mindlessness. Those who exhibit mindlessness have closed themselves off to alternatives and variation in situations and are not authentic in their approach. Scholars suggest,

mindless organizations develop and utilize inhibiting structures and processes.

Mindlessness is characterized by a style of mental functioning in which people follow recipes, impose old categories to classify what they see, act with some rigidity, operate on automatic pilot, and mislabel unfamiliar new contexts as familiar old ones (Hoy et al., p. 39).

In familiar situations mental functioning is guided by well-known scripts (Roberts, Stout, & Halpern, 1994). Some scholars refer to this as “drifting toward inertia” unknowing that things could be different (Weick et al., 1999). Scholars agree that mindless behaviors are employed as operating according to standard procedures without deviation despite changes in the system (Hoy et al, 2006). Mindless behaviors are hazardous to our traditional educational system as well as we provide students with information that is context free encouraging mindless administering (Langer, 1997). This scholar draws a distinction on how to employ more mindful behaviors to
improve learning as this provides students context to remain open and receptive to differing opinions in different situations. She further concludes that one perspective reduces the potential of being mindful and choosing from multiple perspectives creates more mindful learning (Langer, 1999). In HROs where optimal conditions are critical to the safety of the organization, mindfulness is important. This allows the organization to not over simplify when familiar events occur and redefines them as something “less familiar” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 34). Having the flexibility to change perspectives and developing conditions of mindful learning allows HROs options that may have gone unnoticed. As such “mindfulness is not a controlled state of mind that manipulates thoughts and other mental contents, by pushing them to the fringes of consciousness…[mindfulness] is, at its core, simply abiding awareness of what is taking place” (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007, p. 275).

Scholars have argued that HROs address tight coupling and the complexities of their organization with mindfulness (Weick et al., 1999). Since HROs are viewed as potentially catastrophic organizations, investments in mindfulness for HROs have the potential of increasing the organizations safety as there is “greater familiarity with the system, an enlarged response repertoire, and clearer accountability” (Weick et al., 1999, p.111). Mindfulness is vital for HROs to function in order to produce stability and have positive outcomes as a rich awareness of detail. Acting mindfully is one attribute of HROs as noted by scholars as organizing themselves noticing the unexpected prior to escalation into something catastrophic (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

For those in HROs mindfulness contributes to loosening tight coupling by creating alternatives and allowing for varying perspectives, creating a distinct awareness of details where errors that may cascade into catastrophes are detected (Weick et al., 1999). By responding
quickly to early signs of failure or mishaps is another characteristic of HROs that yield more mindful practices (Eck, 2010).

The argument supporting effective HROs according to Weick et al. (1999), encompass five characteristics that reduce “the inertial blind spots that allow failure to cumulate and produce catastrophic outcomes” (p. 83). These scholars incorporate five processes that contribute to an awareness of mindfulness: (a) preoccupation with failure, (b) reluctance to simplify, (c) sensitivity to operations, (d) commitment to resilience, and (e) deference to expertise. Preoccupation with failure is a trademark of HROs as they view any lapse within a system as something that could yield severe consequences. They view this as an indicator of the reliability or health of the system (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003). One condition of HROs is that worry is a distinctive quality. They are “preoccupied with something they seldom see” (Weick et al., 1999, p. 89). Failure is viewed as a condition for learning and a condition on how to increase the health of the organization and viewed as how reliable the system is as a whole. These scholars further contend that maintenance people engage in the largest amount of failure and understand the complexities involved as these failures trigger gaps in other areas. All of these failures lead to learning. Fortunately in HROs, failures are rare.

Reluctance to simplify refers to how HROs seek out and maintain different viewpoints and skepticism. People are naturally prone to interpret new information in ways to confirm their expectations. As a result this simplification can increase the potential for surprises (Weick et al., 1999). Knowing that anomalies can accumulate in HROs without recognizing the potential consequences, seeking out different viewpoints is a critical characteristic. In order to eliminate over simplification “HROs cultivate requisite variety” or “conceptual slack.” Conceptual slack represents seeing what you believe, yet you may be missing a lot. Skeptics are welcomed as this
avoids complacency which improves reliability. Disagreements and divergent perspectives allow for the organization to adjust as members negotiate to yield action as information is shared.

Sensitivity to operations leads HROs to pay attention to real time information. They need to distinguish real time information and understand what can be ignored and what must gain their attention. As a result they have well developed “situational awareness” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Situational awareness refers to a level of intensity and cognitive integration. Scholars agree that situational awareness allows for action to be taken as members notice more and make adjustments in complex environments having a high degree of autonomy. (LaPorte, 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). This means staying “close to the core function of the organization” (Eck, 2011, p. 38). For HROs sensitivity to operations allows for noticing anomalies which are immediately isolated in order to reduce the potential of an unexpected event.

Commitment to resilience is the organization’s ability to bounce back from errors, recover and continue with operations after mishaps or when organizations are continuously stressed. It is about coping in the moment when surprises arise by expanding knowledge and providing expert problem solving. “They allow for rapid pooling of cognitive knowledge to handle events that were impossible to anticipate” (Weick et al., 1999, p. 100). Resilience is preparing for the inevitable by expanding technical expertise and taking command over whatever resources are available (Wildavsky, 1989). Increasing resilient practices allows for people to recognize “new issues in a mindful manner” (Weick et al., 1999, p. 100). It is having the ability to absorb strain, recover, and learn and grow as the result of previous events (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). These scholars further discuss that resilient practices yield new learning, increase flexibility and improve the experience repertoire within the organization. Patterns of resilient behaviors include real time learning where unexpected situations occur at a rapid rate, there is an
increase in wariness, an abundance of coping skills where those within the organization are continuously putting out fires. There is an assumption within HROs that surprise will occur and the variety or repertoires of those within the organization will allow and expect improvisation and adjustments as a result of the disturbance. Scholars further explain, “A commitment to resilience is difficult to sustain because you have to keep learning without knowing in advance just what you will be learning or how it will be applied” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 73).

Lastly, deference to expertise refers to decisions migrating to those in the organization with the greatest expertise. Deferring to expertise allows for filtering information to all levels of the organization where those in lower ranks are expected to question when unexpected problems occur. In examining the differentiation and integration of subsystems in complex organizations, scholars contend the environment in organizations is differentiated into distinct subsystems in order to achieve optimal performance within the organization. As such, the organizations environment allows “managers at lower echelons develop to supplement the hierarchical and administrative systems” where decision making is decentralized in order to make better informed decisions thus leading to optimal performance (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Roberts, Stout, & Halpern, 1994). The decisions are dispersed to those with the greatest expertise. Scholars further give emphasis to accountability in high reliability military organizations where the complexity of the decision when decentralized has not been resolved. “Often when the correct decision is not known or the event is unfamiliar, the decision ratchets up the hierarchy, looking for the person who is ultimately accountable” (Roberts et al., 1994, p. 620). Those at the lower levels of the organizations relieve themselves of the potential high level responsibility. In HROs they link expertise with problems and decisions that are currently in the moment. Anomalies are examined which triggers decision making to other levels of the organization. “Mindfulness, then is attained
to timing as well as to consequences, which means that a mindful system counteracts the typical flaws in garbage can decision making of decisions made by flight and oversight” (Weick et al., 1999, p. 102). The authority is loosened thus providing a less hierarchical culture.

HROs derive benefits from mindful operations as they face tightly coupled complex environments that need flexibility. Scholars posit, “A culture that is less mindful and more deferential to hierarchy is less informed by frontline experience and expertise and is more informed by inputs that are colored by hierarchical dynamics such as uncertainty absorption and withholding bad news” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 77). Bureaucracies that are rigid lack the ability to experiment mindfully. HROs are mindful of having collective responsibility and are given permission to share expertise. When the unexpected occurs, hierarchies are not necessarily most knowledgeable, as knowledge is shared. This allows for organizational flexibility and availability of those in authority to those “in the trenches.” All input is seen as a contribution to potentially resolving the unexpected event. Reporting of errors is seen as a contribution and encouraged as a potential strength of HROs.

Mindfulness contributes to an organization’s flexibility as it infuses diverse perspectives. Reliability seeking organizations can use skilled temporary employees to increase communication with existing employees which allows for differing points of view in order to innovate practice. “Mindfulness is as much about the quality of attention as it is about the conservation of attention. It is as much about what people do with what they notice as it is about the activity of noticing itself” (Weick et al., 1999, p. 90). “Events have multiple interpretations, and mindful individuals search for variation and subtlety in meaning; impulsive can be spontaneous, rigid can be consistent, and weak can be sensitive” (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 239). Mindfulness allows for adaptability, alertness, flexibility, and responsiveness. For HROs this
construct allows for exploration of one’s consciousness in order to build awareness in *real time*. Lastly, these characteristics have the potential to improve conditions necessary for creativity, improvisation, innovation, awareness, and resiliency all processes necessary for error identification. These are all critical components in running a schoolhouse in the age of high stakes and accountability.

**Resilience**

Commitment to resilience is one of the five mindfulness principles. This principle defines resilience as, “the intrinsic ability of an organization (system) to maintain or regain a dynamically stable state, which allows it to continue to operations after a major mishap and/or in the presence of a continuous stress” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 14). Scholars agree it is the ability to absorb change, sustain shock, cope with unexpected events and to bounce back from disruptions in order to develop new capabilities (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Wildavsky, 1988). Systems that demonstrate resiliency have a repertoire of combinations and coping skills that allow for improvisation that yields new learning (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003). How any system adapts is assessed by how it responds to challenges as they arise. These scholars further noted resilient behaviors as qualities exhibited by the emergency management organization during the September 11th attack in New York. “Robust adaptive behavior, demonstrating considerable improvisation, evidence of goal-directed solution-seeking and incorporating resources from diverse sources” (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003, p. 75). Other scholars suggest resiliency concerns itself with the adaptability of a system and the ability to intervene in order to increase capacity (Woods & Cook, 2006). Further research on organizational resiliency discusses conditions for ongoing improvement and resourcefulness as it
pertains to healthcare. Organizational resiliency is promoted based on how hospitals respond to setbacks.

Commitment to resilience is also a characteristic of mindful organization. No organization or school is perfect, and mindful principals know better than most that they must develop a capacity not only to identify mistakes early but also to bounce back and overcome them. No amount of anticipation is going to prevent mistakes, so resilience is critical. (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 240).

HROs respond to and cope with unexpected events in real time. They learn from unpleasant events and previous episodes where resiliency was demonstrated (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). As conditions remain dormant, resiliency allows a system to withstand harmful and potential upheaval by maintaining barriers to protect a system from becoming disaster (Hollnagel, 2006). As a result, people become resilient within a system when they utilize the potential abilities within that system when expected and unexpected events occur. Scholars argue that mindful schools develop the ability to anticipate surprises, but when unexpected events occur, schools rebound with persistence and resilience (Hoy et al., 2006). It allows for those in an organization for “adaptive behavior that was not dependent on either specific physical facilities or specific technological systems” (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003, p. 78) but behavior that is drawn from resources, expertise, and initiative. Resilient responses require some form of anticipation that error is probable in HROs and the ability to improvise and apply flexibility are tenets necessary to foresee unforeseen circumstances. When unanticipated events occur, information is sought out within the organization that is robust, yet stressful. Scholars suggest “not just strong and durable, but suitable in all particulars” (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003, p. 81). Despite the loss of life as a result of the brutal attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), the displacement of some 50,000
people who worked there, and the impact of this disaster on the world, there was a clear, unpredictable adaptability, flexibility, improvisation and resiliency executed that bolstered effective responses and problem solving as a result of adaptive strategies employed.

Chapter Summary

In summary, HROs are adaptive learning organizations with cultures that support the reporting of errors and cultivate mindful practices in order to reduce the potential of failure. In HROs there is a culture of trust where reporting of errors is encouraged and experimentation is applauded. These organizations must be reliable as the public places high demand on them knowing they have the potential for disaster. Furthermore, as HROs cope with unanticipated events, it is necessary to have a repertoire of skills which allows for improvisation where learning occurs across the organization. During such times, the way in which these systems adapt and confront challenges demonstrates resilient practices.

There is a for sure cost for underperformance in HROs and school organizations. HROs evolve when the public believes there is a potential that may yield catastrophic results. Community pressures allow for the scrutiny of systems to ensure that catastrophic outcomes will never happen. Outside pressures are also watching school performance in order to yield positive student outcomes. As we examine the effectiveness of schools knowing the increase in the demands of the job, underfunded mandates, limited and inadequate resources, there is no doubt that schools face daunting challenges that seem untenable, yet the expectations have not diminished. Schools are complex systems that are unlikely to be successful and sustainable without considering the guidance and principles of HROs. It makes sense to consider the role of HROs as contributing to the overall reliability of their performance. The high demands and public scrutiny our school organizations are experiencing will need to consider implementing
characteristics of HROs which may have the potential to increase positive student outcomes and reduce failure. The four characteristics, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise all lead to more mindful organizations. In an age of accountability leaders in public education should encounter a reporting culture as being seen as “learning” and “adjusting” versus failure. Creating a culture in schools where errors are encouraged is a different dynamic than what the schoolhouse is accustomed to, but commonly demonstrated and professed in HROs. This will require trust within all levels of the organization where improvisation is encouraged in order to lead mindfully in an age of scrutiny and accountability. Taking responsible risks that yield learning is a characteristic rarely evidenced in schools.

If principals are expected to “put out fires,” alert to operations, maintain situational complexity, have redundant systems in place to prevent student failure, and seek the expertise at all levels of the organization, they will have to deepen their understanding of mindfulness in school leadership. Employing the above mentioned four processes has the potential to have a positive effect on student outcomes. Furthermore, like HROs, schools are actively recruiting at all levels of the organization and training professionals in order to achieve optimal results.

Schools are complex systems and not necessarily understood to the extent needed to support their efforts. We need a process that will increase the reliability of our schoolhouse. This will provide systems to address “tight” and “loose” coupling which are characteristics of HROs that are fluid. Schools in general are “tight” on processes, and “loose” on systems to achieve processes (Eck, 2011, p. 22). Loose coupling demonstrated in schools provides autonomy where every new signal does not necessarily need to be responded to, but allows for adaptation within the system.
HROs rely heavily on mindfulness in order to manage the unexpected and reduce the potential for disaster. Regarding schools, Hoy et al. (2006) affirm, “Mindful administrators seize the moment of opportunity, but inattentive ones, having missed the subtleties of change, find themselves unpleasantly surprised and trapped by the unexpected” (p. 237). Principals who exhibit mindful behaviors notice the warning signs that have the possibility for failure. These scholars further note “it is a habit of mind that scans for subtle changes that cause trouble” (p. 237). It requires principals to be open avoiding the “traps of narrow context.”

This action research study contributes to the literature related to HROs, mindfulness and resiliency by examining how employing these characteristics have the potential to strengthen the effectiveness of schools in an age of accountability. Like HROs, schools have the ability to identify early stages of student failure and adjust thus increasing the organization’s reliability. Like HROs schools need the flexibility and a commitment that allows for improvisation and decentralized decision making in order to reduce student failure. As noted in the above review, resiliency is a component necessary knowing that error is inevitable and organizations and schools must “bounce back.” How schools anticipate surprises, cope with the unexpected, and adjust probes into their commitment to resilience. As this increases in schools, their action repertoire increases as the capabilities collectively have an expanded knowledge to see and deal with potential problems as they arise.

As principals face the daunting task of ensuring positive student outcomes, sustaining the construct of mindfulness will be beneficial in applying a set of norms in order to improve the culture of schools improving attitudes and behaviors that are identified in the following audits that yield different degrees of mindful behaviors. Cultures in schools change as employees make changes and new expectations emerge. Those who are less mindful should reside in the periphery
of the organization understanding that the cultural expectations within the majority are consistent and embraced. How schools and HROs learn from the unexpected is critical as we create a culture that embraces mindful behavior to support practices and ensure that leaders have the guidelines necessary to increase requisite variety in order to improve student outcomes. Those practicing more mindful behaviors have a richer understanding of how things really work and have an understanding of the complexities of any organization because they understand what is actually happening.
CHAPTER THREE

FINDINGS

Weick (2007) examines the way organizations establish for high performance in various settings where the potential for catastrophe is overwhelming. Gawande (2002) has referred to the potential of mistakes made by surgeons due to a mirage of reasons. “Three decades of neuropsychology research have shown us numerous ways in which human judgment, like memory and hearing, is prone to systematic mistakes” (p. 238). The implication of this insight for the work of principals is significant in many ways. Much of a principal’s time is aimed at improving normal operations, detecting problems early by progress monitoring, and recovering from problems quickly. Principals are consistently putting out fires as they are often the first line of defense, yet those making decisions often increase their demands based on compliance driven timelines. The high school principals in this study emphasized how these problems often monopolized their time and took a significant toll on their health and well-being. Roxanne offered such a statement when she described how educators had to cope and be both problem and performance oriented.

I think it’s an admirable thing and maybe a noble thing, but I don’t think it’s a healthy thing, so it sits in the center of my worries, chief worries, because I think those are the kind of conditions that can be really dangerous for wellbeing of individuals and the community in the end. I think we’re going to have a higher incidence rate of people getting sick in dangerous ways and what not, so I worry a lot about how much I’m complicit in that.

The scope and contradictions of the principalship are simply becoming unsustainable or too large for any one person to fulfill. The purpose of this study was three fold: to explore and
identify how reliability and resilience are evident in the daily lives of principals; to examine the
demands and rewards that influence decisions as they put out fires; and lastly, how did
participation in this study assist principals in reflection and becoming more mindful. The chapter
is divided into three major parts, with each addressing a specific purpose respectively.

The first five sections of the chapter present a description of the work of principals using
Weick and Sutcliffe’s (2007) five processes for mindfulness: preoccupation with failure,
commitment to resilience, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, and deference to
expertise. Each of the five processes will be described in the above order and given its own
section. Each section begins with a brief introduction or overview of the process including Fred
and Roxanne’s self-assessment using Weick and Sutcliffe’s audit, as well as scores provided by
each school’s faculty and staff. The description provided in each section then shares specific
incidents gathered from the observations and interviews of both principals that emphasize the
various processes as evident in their school leadership.

The sixth section explores the major influences observed, both demands and rewards, that
were made visible. Here I will describe what I saw as the major sources and ways the
organization was structured that contributed to the problems that needed attention by both
administrators.

The last section shares my personal reflections on the process. I was particularly
interested in how this work contributed to assisting both my key participants in developing their
mindfulness. What I describe, however, is much more the manner in which the study facilitated
an increase in attention to issues of mindfulness in my practice of leadership.
Preoccupation with Failure

Preoccupation with failure reflects the dangers of complacency and calls attention to mistakes as they occur in a school setting. As educators we call attention to failure but we too frequently ask the wrong questions that lead to blame. The ethic of care provides an important antidote to blaming. At CHS, there is an ethos that is focused on community and care for one another. A prime example of care occurred during commencement when a student with a walker was the recipient of the principal’s award. Without reservation a student across the aisle immediately assisted without hesitation and walked her to the podium to receive her acknowledgment. Roxanne and her staff work together at building a culture of respect and community. When I walk through the halls of this school, I see students greeting adults and students who are behaving respectfully. There are clear expectations for positive student behavior. In contrast, PHS has a less structured environment with more freedom to move about than CHS. When one enters this alternative school, it is not uncommon for students to be singing, sitting on the floor, playing the guitar for their classmates, or having discussions with teachers or with Fred. All students call teachers and the principal by their first name. While some may argue this is disrespectful or students should not be calling teachers or the principal by their first name, Fred takes no issue with it and believes that as a practice it cultivates a respectful culture between students and adults, students and students and adults with adults.

The data gathered from the audit, as presented on Table 3 below, show how both principals are open and accessible and attempt to figure out when there are failures. Both principals stated that they were intentional in the way they interacted with faculty as neither wanted to inhibit risk taking by their faculty. Blaming was not something that practiced and as such was not present in the cultures of these schools. Phrases that describe this audit in the
findings include “dropping the ball,” “admitting to error,” “fighting gloves,” “mishaps” and “making progress or not.”

Table 3

*Preoccupation with Failure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>PHS</th>
<th>Roxanne</th>
<th>CHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We actively look for failure of all sizes and try to understand them.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People feel free to talk to administrators about problems.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We treat near misses as information about the health of our school and try to learn from them.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you make a mistake it is not held against you.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When something unexpected occurs, we try to figure out why our expectations were not met.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We regard near misses as failures that reveal potential dangers rather than as successes that show our capability to avoid disaster.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We often update our procedures after experiencing a near miss.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are rewarded if they spot potential trouble.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People report significant mistakes even if others do not notice that a mistake is made.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our administrators actively seek out bad news.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results of audit above show the responses of Fred, Roxanne, and their perspective staffs from strongest to weakest responses. People in HROs openly discuss and are encouraged to report errors. Management in HROs is found to be acutely aware of the dangers of complacency. They pay attention to the first signs of failure and respond prior to escalation. Similarly, student failure is also considered catastrophic where our expectations are that some students will thrive and some will fail. As I examined the audits with both Roxanne and Fred it was evident that complacency in their schools was reported as something that was taken seriously and failure was openly discussed, but tended “not sought out.” Perhaps part of the reasoning for such practice was that “It’s hard to fail when the criteria is progress.” Fred discussed the importance of progress, not competition, but individual growth of his students. Roxanne acquiescently discussed failure from a central office perspective. The incident involving the school barbeque described below provided a telling example of her concern. Her school completed all paperwork, compliance driven mandates, communication to find that the students at CHS were not allowed privileges after a comprehensive attempt to ensure that an all student barbeque would be allowed. Examples of preoccupation with failure will be further explored in the findings of this research.

**Talking about a mistake: Forgetting to use baseline data**

Roxanne is compliant with district mandates and holds herself to all timelines as set forth from the central office. She expects the same from her staff. Inappropriate behavior receives consequences and her school is responsible for positive student outcomes. Her approach is direct when needed and typically makes decisions with students in mind. Despite being a complicated diverse high school, Roxanne pushes her staff hard, but also acknowledges that her school, for a plethora of reasons, is exhausting to work at as the demands are considerable. This year Roxanne
relinquished control of supervising her math department to her assistant principal. She supervised the department for the previous 8 years and created infrastructures that had them running smoothly. They progress monitored all students, flagged students who have previously failed state assessments, developed common assessments and had a common planning time, and implemented interventions for students needing additional support. Just prior to the state assessment she was informed that students who were identified earlier in the school year as needing additional supports were not being served. This was a point of frustration.

Roxanne does not typically publically blame staff when problems arise, but will privately be critical, ask tough questions, and show her emotion as she did with her assistant principal. Despite being upset with him as the math department’s current supervisor, she attended a math department meeting and openly discussed her disappointment. This was an unnecessary error that should have never occurred, which could lead to failure for students. During the department meeting she emphasized how long it took to put infrastructures in place, providing release time for teachers’ professional development, developing a master schedule where they shared common planning time, and yet there were students who were not being served adequately. She began the meeting discussing how administrators “shock absorb” for teachers daily so they can do their jobs with and for students as public servants. She accentuated that the work of teaching students should be no more or less in every classroom and that this negligence was “simply unfair” for students as they must keep the test scores viable. This episode revealed some of the stress that she encounters often and how she highlights the importance of having a sense of urgency while problem solving with her staff. After explaining her concern, Roxanne shared that there was so much to celebrate around their work in the math department, but so much was dependent upon test scores and began to articulate a way forward to prevent failure.
All it takes is a dropped ball in a high visible area, that will have an impact…I heard we did not have the same intentionally about test prep and June 5th is very close. I am assuming and praying that geo and algebra has been going on. There are pockets of kids that are off our radar. Those reclassified 11’s. Even though they were 11’s, they were showing up as 10th graders… Can we do a boot camp? This is the point I am trying to drive. Who are the test takers, how do we focus on them? The reclassified needs extra help. They are already low performing kids. They are sitting in 11th grade classes and we had to make them hyper visible. When we analyzed the data we realized there are 11th graders who are poor performers and yet we are not doing anything focused. They are floundering around going through the same math class again.

Her assistant principal publically stated that he “dropped the ball” regarding this and by admitting to this error, it modeled for the staff that the adults do make and admit to mistakes. These mistakes are discussed publically and openly as part of learning within CHS. There is a certain amount of organizational safety where errors are openly discussed and admitted to.

Roxanne had developed the infrastructure the previous year, setting up for preoccupation with failure and was sensitive to the operations of her school, but the plan was not executed as organized.

Despite this last attempt where Roxanne provided schedule changes, half day boot camps targeting specific students, publically stating that she recognizes that her math department was tired and working hard, she shared privately that her staff may not be able to successfully help students pass the state assessment as a result of the limited timeline prior to the exam. She expected and trusted that her staff would do what was in their locus of control until the state exam, and she will have identified systems in place for the following year in order to reestablish
the procedures. Roxanne believed this episode to be a failure for students that certainly could have been avoided. Roxanne ultimately felt responsible for this mishap as the principal of the school. She did not want to be unduly punitive since it could have the potential to stifle risk taking, but she expected her staff to act responsibly for student outcomes.

*Failure redefined: Creating possibilities*

Fred told me in one interview that there is no “failure” per se at PHS as there are in comprehensive high schools. Students simply are making progress or not toward their goal. They do move students out of the school, but they don’t consider this a failure. The students decide to take another route.

They [referring to students] decided not to follow the program to the extent that you know… *I need to be here, not high, go to class, do the work*, and the criteria is progress. And it's hard to fail when the criteria is progress. We have a kid who is the youngest in the school, he just turned 14. And a sweet kid but he's having a hard time sort of figuring out how to be in a high school. And you know, actually do work. I was meeting with him and his mom and his coordinator. We’re talking about progress, what does it mean to make progress and sort of looking at what he was doing. And really trying to emphasize to him, it's not a competition between him and somebody else. It's about him looking at his own growth and figuring out a way to get from here to there to build up a practice that's going to lead him to success in the school. And then just throwing out things like multiplying the amount of credits he got for a semester to tell him how many decades it would take him to graduate. It wasn’t quite that bad. And he's like “Oh!” It's like yeah, okay, so that's the data. Now, what are we going to do about it? It's like yes…you are making progress.
Fred called attention to the student in a way that demonstrates mindfulness, where
judgment was not cast, but questions posed to cause reflection. Despite the student not making
the progress that others may make during their freshman year, Fred allowed the student to
discover that he was still making progress, just maybe not at the same rate as someone else, but
that was still progress. The student needed to discover this on his own. Fred provided the space
and asked the questions to probe his thinking. The student came to the realization that progress is
interpreted in many ways. Failure and blame were not necessary to making change. And yet,
Fred’s attention to the signals of impending failure assisted in reframing what was happening for
the student to avoid more severe trouble.

*When there is blame: Eat pizza not hotdogs*

Roxanne does not allow 9th grade students to leave campus for their initial year. She feels
it is important to build community with her freshman students prior to allowing off campus lunch
privileges as sophomores. Annually CHS hosts an all school campus day where teacher’s
barbeque hotdogs for students. This simple activity actually is an important element
underscoring the campus ethic of service and community development. Teachers preparing food,
serving, and “breaking bread” are important components of community development and
foundational to this campus celebration inasmuch as all students having the same access to the
same lunch. In order to prepare for this event her Associated Student Body (ASB) advisor
checked with the city concerning food permits, established hand washing stations, purchased
plastic gloves, ensured all servers had food permits, made sure the serving would occur after the
lunchroom sold their lunches to be in compliance with the non-competition clause on the
collective bargaining agreement, and attended to having meat thermometers for the hotdogs. This
was all done well in advance and nutrition services at the school site were consulted several
weeks prior to the event where one new member of the nutrition service team expressed
disappointment, but stated she would go with it. This employee reported this two days prior to
the occasion to the central office.

The day prior to the BBQ, an email came from the central office to me as Roxanne’s
supervisor stating that the event was costing the district additional funds and CHS would not be
allowed to go forward as planned. Roxanne was never consulted and there was no attempt to
gather information from her in making an informed decision. Operationally the district
functioned from a compliance perspective. The email also emphasized student safety as being the
number one priority. The head nutrition advisor at the district level stated that they could have
provided services and they were possibly circumvented.

Personnel in CHS believed they had followed all protocols and were able to serve
hotdogs to students for less money as well as maintain compliance to board policy and meet all
safety requirements of the district and city. Their action had never been questioned in the past as
this barbeque celebration was an annual event. It was Roxanne’s understanding that her kitchen
staff had planned not to be at CHS on the day of the celebration, which indicated they knew
ahead of time about the event. This dilemma came to Roxanne as she was off site as a guest
lecturer.

Our kids on free and reduced lunch deserve to have one day where they do not have to eat
in the cafeteria or stand in a line. Our vision is that our campus day should result in no
second-class citizenship. By keeping 9th graders on campus 179 other days of the year we
have raised revenue in record fashion. We are asking for one day. Historically, wealthy
students used to leave campus and go to the water park. We worked hard to keep it here
on campus to make sure that all kids could participate in everything and to make sure that
money played no role. Perhaps we will move our campus day off our campus so that adult issues do not become the centerpiece of what should be the kids’ day….It is no wonder we can never take our fighting gloves off. I don’t get the impression that many folks in central office know our work, understand our work, or support our work. If this were an isolated comedy of errors I could live with it. This kind of knee-jerk, uninformed decision making goes on all the time and I am hard-pressed to find the connection of what we say we are about and how we operate.

Using the term “fighting gloves” indicated how stressful it was for Roxanne to conduct business as usual with central office getting in way. Despite the district office having “financial impact” concerns, the campus day concluded with a $4000 dollar lunch as the school had to purchase $1800 in pizza, $1000 additional snacks as students were in “limbo” all day and they were at Costco awaiting a district decision, and $1300 payment to nutrition services since they lost a day of revenue. The school was able to recover some money as they returned some snacks to Costco. This was incredibly troubling on many fronts, but most importantly for Roxanne was that the experience for students was simply not the same. Being handed a slice of pizza is quite different than having your teachers prepare and serve you a barbequed hotdog. This error cost a school with a high poverty demographic, additional resources. More importantly perhaps was the demoralizing experience. Nobody examined the relationship between all of the components or the significant impact this would have on students and staff. A decision was made without consultation, reviewing all pertinent information, and based on perceived compliance versus a lack of understanding of the impact of such a decision.

After the event the ASB students and their advisor wrote a letter to the superintendent explaining what had occurred. It stated,
despite careful planning, attention to details, and rigorous rule-following, we were
prevented from hosting an event for reasons that remain unclear to us. We would like to
communicate what happened last week to the student body and to our teachers, but we
require clarification. If we were in violation of nutritional services related policies, why
didn’t our lunchroom manager report this to her director the previous month or week
before the event? We request clarification so that we can reflect, plan, and communicate
to the ASB. We also request reimbursement for the fire permits we were prevented from
using and for the additional $600 we had to spend to feed our student body.

The content of the letter suggested that what was disconcerting for those in the school was that
nobody at the district office acknowledged their mistake or accepted any accountability for a
reactive decision that was lacking significant pieces of information. A memorandum of
explanation to the advisor placed blame on the school. It promised training in policies and
procedures and clarified what can or cannot take place during school events. The school was
informed that they lacked proactive communication, whereas the lack of communication was the
result of the head cafeteria employee to nutrition services reporting her dissatisfaction at the very
last minute.

*Student safety*

There is a distinct culture at PHS that promotes error reporting. Zhao and Olivera (2006),
refer to organizations who report errors with high levels of psychological safety are “likely to
alleviate individuals’ concerns about others’ reactions to disclosing and discussing errors” (p.
115). This error was reported by students knowing that Fred needed this information to maintain
a safe, healthy environment. Fred experienced a rule-based error where a student had an
altercation with another student and pulled out a knife. Typically a student would be suspended
for such an act in most schools. Fred believed the plan to suspend was inappropriate for the desired outcome of working with the student and applied a different plan of action. He was very familiar with this student and his advisor and was given permission to have an open dialogue with the student and reflect deeply on what actually occurred. Fred discussed what he believed to be in the students’ best interest by working with the security department at the central office.

I negotiated with district security who allowed me 24 hours to try to figure out what was going on because we know our kids really well here. I was pretty confident that in this situation, a conversation was what was needed so the student could learn from it. Fred further explained that this particular student was having challenges getting to class, completing assignments, and managing social pressures. Fred is not diametrically opposed to suspension, but he rather not compound one mistake with another. He therefore operates by conversing with students to make sense of why a student behaved in such a manner that they know they are being inappropriate. It is Fred’s belief if you put this student in a different situation, he will make better choices. Fred’s intuition told him this was not the kind of student that would consider using the knife, but would probably state it was for his own protection or have a different excuse about why it was in his possession. Fred’s ability to make that judgment stems from his social political activism from when he was in his twenties.

*Noting failure: A negative case of poor instruction*

Preoccupation of failure can be seen as walking a fine line. In noticing a problem, principals needed to bring the issue to the attention of others or had others share what they had observed which was troubling or potentially so. Keeping blame out of the mix, allowed for freer exchange between participants. Yet, in one example the avoidance of the stigma associated with failure appeared to be taken advantage of. Fred was particularly concerned by what he saw as a
complacent attitude toward teaching by couple of his teachers. Fred defined the ongoing problems in their classrooms as failure in that for too many students, inquiry or safety were not present. For example, he shared,

I go into Pete’s classroom and he’s sort of old time….and he thinks he has the answer to stuff. His whole approach to teaching is I am going to teach them. So a typical discussion in his classroom involves people sitting around and he’ll ask a question and then someone will answer it and he will—I mean literally nine times out of ten—give an answer. “So yeah, and then let me add this to it.” You just know the kids are feeling like there’s no way I could ever give the right answer because he’s going to cut me off or he’s going to add something onto it that I didn’t say. There’s almost no student to student engagement in his classes. Students recognize this and some students—he has the smallest number, he has the smallest retention numbers of students in his classes, the smallest number of students with credits. He does other things for the school but in terms of this stuff--there is a small group of students who like being in there. They are sort of like being told the information… They are passive recipients. It’s not bad information….He’s so self-centered that he thinks he is having some sort of inquiry discussion with the students. It’s hard to talk with him about it because then he turns it right back on me saying I’m not respecting him and what he’s doing…if he doesn’t give the content out, where are they going to get it? So he and I tend to go around in circles with these things.

Pete is a complacent employee that believes what he is teaching is relevant and engaging for students. Fred is locked in a struggle with him regarding the importance of a more inquiry oriented approach and including students in authentic discussion or debate regarding topics presented. Fred handles the controversy with staff well, but it has not lead to a change in practice
as the teacher doesn’t believe it is beneficial to his students or doesn’t believe his practice is in need of scrutiny.

Commitment to Resilience

Principal are expected to be instructional leaders first and foremost. It is no simple responsibility and involves duties that include assessing student performance on state assessments, reviewing high school graduation rates, identifying areas on for improvement on the performance management report that need attention, monitoring attendance, dealing with dropouts, and following through with the central office. The list of what is fully involved in leading instruction, however, is much more complicated. It involves what is fundamentally the most human oriented and impacted aspects of social development of youths. Roxanne reflects on this social development.

We’re the Last Chance Corral for a lot of kids, and if we’re not in tune to what’s going on for the kids in their lives and at the same time aware of where we need to get them, we fail. Either we fail in the moment because the kids will let us know….You see them die right in front you, sometimes literally. But certainly, figuratively, in some ways and you see it – it is immediate on them. It’s a very exposed vulnerable place.

Educators in both schools were committed to confronting head-on the challenges present in their work and to perseverance as well as persistence despite what they saw as unfair representation of their students’ performance and disincentives due to unjust financial rewards and punishments.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) affirm “humans and technologies are fallible” (p. 98) indicating errors are inevitable in HROs. This certainly holds true for schools as well. The audit below suggests Fred and Roxanne’s ability to “bounce back” from errors by having the ability to cope with surprise. Responses from faculty in both schools affirmed their ability to improvise
when unforeseen events occur. In looking at these results, Roxanne shared her heartfelt story of a young former student whose life was taken unexpectedly. She supports the ethos of the school, “people before paper.” Evidence of this shared philosophy manifested in the students and teachers determining that the best way to support the family of the deceased student, and to honor the students himself, was to craft and make the coffin the student would be burned in. This departure from standard operations served a practical help to a family with limited resources and in need as well as modeled the “school as extended family” which is characteristic of CHS. Hollnagel (2006) profoundly reminds us, “A resilient organization must, however, not only be able to change from one state to a more appropriate one in time [as is the case with the death of this young man], but also be able to return to normal functioning when the alerting or unusual conditions are over” (p. 344). Despite the tragedy, CHS returned to normal functioning and regardless of ongoing unfunded mandates, increased accountability, viable test scores, an ethic of care was what was most important to Roxanne.

Schools are prepared to cope when the unexpected occurs and recover quickly enough if warning signs are detected early. Anticipation plays a vital role that protects schools from potential risks. Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) discuss resilience as “probes into learning, knowledge, and capability development” (p. 99). Fred encourages his staff to allow for student inquiry and encourages discourse in staff meetings as well as classrooms. The first five responses in the audit below clearly exemplify how PHS has an exceptional action repertoire. Students come to PHS having encountered significant barriers, yet PHS provides an environment that empowers and fosters learning so students grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially. It is more than just barriers from Fred’s perspective. They are empowered, have a voice, and participate in their own learning. Norms created at PHS by students include “step up and step
back” and “non-closure” as indicators in being comfortable with ambiguity. These norms demonstrate a commitment to resilience as differing points of view are encouraged and valued. It’s not only Fred being able to manage and respond to students, but the staff’s ability to embrace the unexpected and cope in order to create an environment that supports and nurtures students.

*Table 4*

*Commitment to Resilience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>PHS</th>
<th>Roxanne</th>
<th>CHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This organization encourages challenging “stretch” assignments.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People around here are known for their ability to use their knowledge in novel ways.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People rely on one another.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have a number of informal contacts that they sometimes use to solve problems.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people have the skills to act on the unexpected problems that arise.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This organization is actively concerned with developing people’s skills and knowledge.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have more than enough training and experience for the kind of work they do.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a concern with building people’s competence and response repertoires.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People learn from their mistakes.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources are continually devoted to training people to operate the technical system.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Commitment to resilience had both Roxanne and Fred encouraging staff members to *stretch* their thinking in order to learn. HROs refer to this as conceptual slack. Members are
encouraged to question, exchange information, and gain a deeper understanding. It is evident in both schools and by the results of the audit that people rely on one another as an acceptable, respectful culture. An excerpt from Fred’s commencement speech exemplifies a culture that promotes one’s identity and encourages students to develop skills and knowledge, question, and to think critically. “It is about: reflection, reinterpretation, realignment, reordering one’s priorities, refusing to accept hypocrisy, telling the naked truth, reshaping and repurposing one’s life, mindfulness, respect, resilience, responsibility.” Fred’s final quote from Michael Eric Dyson, “Continue to have the courage to exist beyond anyone’s permission” clearly articulates his emphasis on challenging and stretching one’s knowledge.

A weaker response in the audit, People have more than enough training and experience for the kind of work that they do indicates an environment that inhibits growth and accepts the status quo versus high reliability organizations that are learning organizations with ongoing training where complacency in discouraged. I attributed this to limited resources at the district level where professional development is not ongoing and job embedded in order to enhance expertise. The results from this audit yields a strong commitment to resilience and a capacity for mindfulness as there are similarities in responses between both principals and their staffs.

Students first

It was the beginning of the new school year and Roxanne was reviewing her performance management data so that she could discuss it with her administrative team and teachers. She wanted to help them be more efficient. There had been too much duplication of efforts last year and she knew the school could score better. Roxanne’s feelings about how the school was being measured or more accurately having their hard work be undervalued due to mis-measurement was a source of angst. She was not going to accept that it was an underperforming school. She
was working to disaggregate her data to analyze where scores were likely to go down based on cohort scores, an increase in newcomer ELL students, and level of proficiency of her current students. She understood the importance of being strategic and efficient and she was going to see that they made it happen.

Sitting in her office, a former student’s family who left CHS mid senior year came in. Members of the family were visibly upset. They had come to talk with Roxanne about the recent death of their son. He had been at home when the young man’s bedroom window led him to open the shades at which time he was fatally shot in the head. For a brief moment, Roxanne thought about what she had been doing or needing to do in analyzing her school’s data given the urgency to assist her teachers in better preparing for the coming district and state assessments and worried about this incident pulling them off-course, but quickly regained her core values as she saw their grief. It didn’t matter that this student no longer attended CHS, the parents knew the culture at CHS, and understood that Roxanne was there to help them. After listening and grieving they decided that CHS students would make the casket for their son. The family did not have the resources for the burial. The school had a shop class that could accomplish the task. Ironically, the place this student most loved and had thrived in, the woodshop was the “place of his own burn box” as stated by Roxanne. Roxanne later reflected on how this was a project that was appropriate in many ways for both the school and family.

In days that followed, Roxanne conducted instructional rounds. In making her visits, she made particular attention to stop by the woodshop to see 8 or 9 young students working on a 7 foot coffin, heartfully paying attention to the most finite detail as they cut and sanded the wood. A classmate was going to find his final days of rest inside this wood box. It caused extreme pause, yet Roxanne was so incredibly proud of the time, the unwavering effort, the profound
love, the support for each other that she saw her students demonstrate. Just a couple of days later, hundreds of CHS students and staff from many ethnic and religious backgrounds would gather at a beautiful Thai Buddhist funeral and say a final farewell to their “brother.” Test scores are important and Roxanne pays much attention to what they tell her about what is happening in her school. Her work’s priority, however, is revealed in the heart, soul, love, or care for her students and their families. The resiliency she is after is not primarily concerned with measures on state assessments, district benchmarks, school climate, or student growth outcomes. According to Roxanne, her commitment is best enacted when “people come before paper.”

*Nurturing student resilience*

Fred emphasized students at PHS *roll with it* despite having incident after incident that take a toll on their lives. Pianta and Walsh (1998) speak to this capability: “Resilience reflects a certain form of branching. Instead of following the expected pathway from risk to disorder, some children cope well under hazardous circumstances” (p. 409). As researchers seek to identify resilient behaviors in students, it should be noted that it is vexing to practitioners how some children succeed and some do not. Pianta and Walsh profess, “efforts to promote resilience do not fall into the trap of a single-factor explanations for success under conditions of risk” (p. 410). It is equally challenging not to understand harsh realities students face daily, yet as professionals some make profound judgments and examine their realities with great scrutiny. Often educators blame students for their problems rather than understanding or examining where things have gone wrong. It is necessary to look at the individual student, their home, and their school experience. Pianta and Walsh further contend, “Risk and resilience are not a characteristic of a child or a family or a school but are characteristic of a process involving the interactions of
systems (p. 411). Fred’s description of how he approaches his work as principal provides a clear example of such understanding.

Yet, if understanding where students come from was where Fred’s notions of resiliency stopped, then it would be a weak idea at best. Fred’s description of how students were helped to handle problems was more than just overcoming significant obstacles. The vision of schooling embraced by Fred and put into practice at PHS provided students with an opportunity to participate in their own learning. He argued,

ey they eventually realize that they can change what learning is for them. So that it’s something that they drive, they determine, they have a voice in. And I think that it’s the level of empowering that you can’t make someone be empowered but you can create an environment and foster it and you know water it and nurture it. And then they take it on. And then when you -- also when you go from one to 100 to 200 to 300 kids doing that, and then the staff did understands that and also nurtures it.

Despite the various backgrounds and challenges of PHS students, once they understand the environment at school is one that empowers them to foster their own growth, they thrive.

Fred’s notion of resiliency was best articulated during his commencement speech that he gave in the spring. He began by asking his audience the question, What is a Pheline High School education? He answered,

A Pheline High School education is reclaiming the love of learning, reactivating the joy of intellectual engagement, recovering, recapturing, reviving the human spirit. It is about: rebellion, redemption, renewal, repair, regeneration. It is reunification of the mind and body. Recognizing false binaries, realizing the power of one as well as the power of collective will. Rebounding from mistakes, readjusting to new circumstances, recapturing
and reviving lost love, reconciling love and loss, developing reciprocal relationships. It is about: revolution, recycling, redistribution of resources, healing the soul and healing the earth, it is reconstructing social constructs, reconsidering one’s place in the world, redefining race and gender, reinventing identity, repudiating biases and oppressions, relishing difference. It is about: reflection, reinterpretation, realignment, reordering one’s priorities, refusing to accept hypocrisy, telling the naked truth, reshaping and repurposing one’s life, mindfulness, respect, resilience, responsibility. A Pheline High School education is about transformation of the self and society. Graduates, I am awestruck every day by your ability to make good choices, your compassion toward others, your questioning, your audaciousness, your search for better answers. Tonight I ask that you carry with you these thoughts and words from Michael Eric Dyson: “Continue to have the courage to exist beyond anyone’s permission.”

*Facilitating resiliency for staff*

PHS combines teaching through inquiry process and balance instruction and personalization with students. Fred’s theory of action is that PHS is a non-graded competency, inquiry, project and problem-based teaching and learning system with culturally relevant content and high expectations combined with performance and portfolio assessment, supported by personalized advisory groups and differentiated instruction that will engage all learners and significantly decrease the achievement gap. One concerning problem is that PHS is historically underfunded and teachers, due to the students they serve, are maxed out. Fred, therefore, works with his faculty to develop their resiliency as well. Pianta and Walsh (1998) contend, “adult-child relationships are so closely intertwined with the developmental processes that give rise to
competence. Relationships with adults are resources for the processes that fuel positive outcomes, regardless of risk” (p. 415).

Teamwork is the key to what Fred sees as important to building the capacity for resilient action among his staff. Staff members have to be able to rely on one another if they are to appropriately manage the unexpected.

I always emphasize with the staff is that balance. Like the secondary trauma stuff that we've done...where you got to keep that balance in your life. And so I really encourage them that if they know they need a mental health day... I got to check on my childcare or whatever. I said go take care of it, we'll cover for you. And I think people really respect that. And it helps them do the work that they're doing. Because we absorb so much of that secondary trauma in school while we're doing what we're doing and we're a school. We're not a social service agency. But we do a lot of that kind of work with the kids.

A comprehensive high school typically does not work as closely or intensely with students as the alternative school like PHS. Teachers in comprehensive schools typically see between 120 and 150 students per day and only for a semester, maybe two if students are lucky. At PHS, they are with students all day and for years. Teachers are able to develop an in depth understanding of each student’s story which allows for even encourages relationship and reflection.

We're with them for literally years and we build really tight relationships, and they bring us a lot of stuff, and you know, I mean like a young woman this morning was telling me about the time when she had gotten raped. I'm just listening, you know? I have to absorb it, or the kid who found his mother dead. You can't walk away from that -- so when our staff gets together, we're carrying all of these things. We have inequities where some people are carrying more than other people. Some people are doing – dealing with it –
dealing with the kids better than other people, and some staff, in terms of their personal lives, are eating healthier, they're taking time, they're exercising, and some aren’t.

The student who found his mother dead in her bed over the weekend, still came to school Monday morning. That same day another student’s parents came in to inform Fred that their son was in the hospital as a result of some extreme self-harming behaviors. Fred gathered a team of teachers together to develop a plan on how they would support this student once he returned. The flexibility created and practiced at PHS was put to use in the service of strengthening and sustaining educator resilience.

Finally, Fred acted as a buffer for his staff so they could do what they needed to be doing. A critical decision in today’s high accountability environment was his intentional suppression of discussing district mandates. Fred did not want his staff talking or conceptualizing their work in terms of minimum standards or bounded by intentional choice. Unless a mandate would have a definite impact on PHS, he elected not to convey the messages he received from the district office about how teachers were to instruct and develop programs. He buffered his staff from outside and unnecessary distractions. He felt that his teachers recognized the importance of their work and where intent on figuring out what it was that they needed to be doing for their students. He stated, “I mean here, people who are just like impassioned and engaged and yet I walk into a meeting dominated by administrators who are like you have to do it this way, there is no discussion.”

Mismanaging enrollment: Burdening teachers and forgetting students

Both Fred and Roxanne shared a perspective that the resiliency that they as educational leaders were required to possess was because of problems created by those in the district’s office. Perhaps one of the most telling examples of this need took place at the beginning of the school
year. Approximately 200 additional students showed up at CHS on the first day of school. The Office of Enrollment Management had significantly under projected the number of students despite warning from Roxanne the previous spring when enrollment projections were released. When too many or two few students come to school, principals are presented with a significant challenge in reworking the master schedule. Roxanne reported the additional students to the district office, but received no support given the higher enrollment figures. She approached her staff and requested if some of them could teach all day, without a planning period, in order to get students in classrooms until she could receive additional resources. Her faculty agreed. The resources (4 additional teachers) were not released until early December, however. The lack of additional 4 staff members for an already highly impacted school should have occurred well before midwinter but did not occur for various reasons that were not shared with the principals. Roxanne was told repeatedly that a solution was in process but no monies were released. Once it was clear that the district was not going to provide funding until later in the semester, Roxanne used monies originally designated for supplies to purchase substitutes. There were other ways in which the school operations were impacted and adjustments made given the additional numbers of students on the rolls. An error of this type could have been avoided if a cap was placed on CHS or if identified students from other boundary areas were informed that they must attend their neighborhood school or if the data presented to the district office the previous Spring were given credence. Further evidence of system’s breakdown was that another school in the south end was severely under enrolled and CHS received approximately 400 of their students.

Sensitivity to Operations

Schools are increasingly discussed and judged on the success of their results, yet many systems of reporting have errors or are too easily misinterpreted. Schools report data to the
newspaper and through various media using a snapshot approach that results in judgments about schools that seriously impact on how communities and staff feel about their schools. Roxanne, in sharing information about what was to be released to the press with her administrative team, sought to prepare those she worked with for what they were to face when questioned about the school’s scores.

How do we make meaning of our climate survey data, especially around how people feel about their neighborhood schools, when we know, and the attached data suggests, that communities that are struggling are “unhappier” over all? A couple of years ago I compared the data of all comprehensive high schools and there was a clear difference between north and south end schools as it relates to this survey. We knew then that affluence and privilege directly translated to school satisfaction. What is the moral imperative here? What questions should be called to the table? How are we collectively further damaging good people by hanging unjust ranking numbers and titles on their work and their hearts and souls? What are the implications for kids? How long will we be complicit in these toxic practices? So what? Now what?

Roxanne’s understanding of how the school functioned and what sense was to be made of its outcomes were continually updated by reference to context. Sensitivity to operations provided an important defense against misreported data. Data according to Roxanne and Fred was best used formatively for guiding operational decisions rather than in a summative fashion that glossed over critical details. Data were collected to point out the complexity of what was going on in their school. Their approach to policy and procedures was likewise that of using these features of the organization to guide rather than dictate action. Both struggled with the misfit or gap between
the ideal defined in manuals and what could be termed real, although real does not accurately reflect the messy, lived, temporary, and ambiguous qualities of experience.

Sensitivity to operations is one characteristic of HROs where leaders are in constant contact with those “on the ground.” Identifying small events that can grow into bigger problems enable us to “catch errors” that have the potential to accumulate. There is ongoing communication and interaction with teachers as well as frequent communication with operations. Principals are “staying close to the core function of the organization” (Eck, 2011, p. 38). Unusual variations are detected prior to escalation.

The audit generated results based on one of two responses: agree or disagree. Reviewing the results from the audit on Table 5 below, it is evident that Roxanne and Fred pitch in, are accessible, pay attention to what is happening, resolve conflict, and openly share unexpected events. It is interesting that neither principal believes that there are a variety of resources when unexpected events “crop up” yet teachers believe they have the necessary resources when anomalies occur. Additionally, teachers reported neglecting to notice how principals monitor workload, yet from my observations, it was clear that both principals constantly “buffer” for their staff unnecessary requests from central office so they can “do their job.” Both high schools have an inordinate amount of students with high social emotional needs as well as high poverty. It is not uncommon for both schools to experience physical exhaustion as the demands at both schools are colossal. Roxanne has frequently discussed how weekends play an important role as she needs to revitalize in order to “hit the ground running” on Monday. The scores in the audit below indicate a healthy sensitivity to operations that yield mindful practices that are commonplace in HROs.
Table 5

Sensitivity to Operations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>PHS</th>
<th>Roxanne</th>
<th>CHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On a day-to-day basis, there is always someone who is</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paying attention to what is happening.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When problems occur, someone with the authority to</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>act is accessible to people on the front lines.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our administrators readily pitch in.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have discretion to resolve unexpected problems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as they arise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During an average day, people interact often enough to</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>build a clear picture of the current situation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are always looking for feedback about things</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that aren’t going right.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are familiar with operations beyond their job.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have access to a variety of resources whenever</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unexpected surprises crop up.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators constantly monitor workloads and</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reduce them when they become excessive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Making the right call: A safe call

In the early spring, CHS had to be emergency evacuated. Several teachers and students noticed a strong smell of gas at the onset of the school day. Roxanne immediately contacted her supervisor and explained that they were evacuating approximately 1500 students and staff to the gym. Following safety protocols, she appropriately contacted personnel in the district who dispatched someone to the scene. Unbeknown to Roxanne, the individuals who were dispatched were not experts on gas leaks, but were taking direction from their supervisor who had a background as a health professional. The district representative who was a member of the unit charged with safety, arrived at the scene, conducted an inspection, and reached a decision without any contact with the principal. Roxanne was left to wait while the staff tried to engage and entertain students in the gym for nearly two hours. Assuming that she would meet the districts safety representative to share the information she had gathered, she became increasingly concerned that no action was being taken. The school was nearing the lunch hour, and students needed to be fed and needed to use facilities. She had 1500 students in a gym that she needed to be in class learning, if the building was safe or sent home if the facility was unsafe. She began using other channels within the school’s organization to get action. Roxanne phoned me as her supervisor to figure out what was happening. She also made phone calls to the Superintendent’s Office to get an update on the status of the building.

Several staff went back into the building while they waited, but returned with reports that the strong odor was still present. The students were in the gym for close to two hours when word came. The school received an “all clear” to return to normal activities. Roxanne was told that the campus was safe. The odor was not gone and Roxanne made a number of inquiries for details about the assessment and condition of her facility. One district official stated if a student or staff
member became nauseous or has a headache upon re-entry of the school that they could be sent home. Roxanne and her administrative team became increasingly uncomfortable with the decision that had been made and the guidance they were receiving for the ongoing issues they were experiencing. The well-being of her staff and students was not something Roxanne was willing to jeopardize. Further, Roxanne felt that she had a responsibility to maintain trust with her community. Roxanne inquired about the disciplinary action that would follow if she overrode the district’s order. Roxanne assessed the risk of serious injury, and the potential loss of community trust and emotional safety, as outweighing the risks of a professional reprimand and sent the children and staff home.

The gas company’s sent a representative who arrived that afternoon. The email Roxanne sent to her faculty explained that the problem was a “gas leak due to a bad valve on the water heater that heats the water to the cafeteria. Consequently, the water boiler has been ‘red tagged’ meaning we can’t use it until it is replaced or fixed.” She continued,

We will be in session on regular hours tomorrow. I am awaiting response from the district about the repair/replacement and have requested contingency plans for breakfast and lunch tomorrow in the event that it is not repaired by tomorrow. In addition, the assistant principal is noting areas where we can improve on our emergency response plans as there is always room for growth. New challenges bring us new learning! Regarding combustibility, in the case of today as measured by many highly sensitive instruments, the amount of gas in the air was very low and not combustible. Of course, until we know the source of the problem, we always err on the side of caution.
Curriculum: A negative case

Roxanne had one of her teachers sit on the textbook adoption committee as the district was in the process of making an adoption for its social studies curriculum. Despite spending significant time on this committee, Roxanne received an email that her school would not receive the newly adopted textbook as they had purchased textbooks three years prior of an older edition of the newly adopted text and it was considered “new enough.” Curriculum and instruction personnel communicated that the “Board made the decision.” Roxanne believed this to be unfair and unjust and was sure the Board was unaware of the decision as she contacted her Board member who knew nothing about it. Roxanne expressed her dismay and that of her faculty.

We are displeased at Capitol and do not feel our needs were adequately addressed. Our kids shouldn’t have to carry around two resources nor should our teachers have to do the extra work of cross referencing. A district-wide adoption should be just that--district-wide. This process has placed the greatest number of vulnerable children, and the teachers who serve them, at a disadvantage. This is a gap widener and disheartening. This will not go over well with my staff nor my community. My PTSA president, who works at a graduate school of education, hit the roof when she first heard of the initial decision. Teachers know what is involved in their work. Roxanne was accessible and attempted to work through the problem with them but to no effect.

In the words of one of my social study staff, "I personally think this is a weak fix. Our students (and our department) will now have a separate resource to manage and make sense of, physically disconnected from the core text. All instructors should, of course, be continually providing additional handouts and readings to our students. No AP course is
supposed to be "textbook driven." However this fix is creating one more logistic that may get in the way of our students’ learning.

This is better than nothing, but probably not as tenable long term.

Roxanne was also surprised when her teachers received 400 e copies of the text. “What am I going to do with them? Our students don’t have e-readers. What will we do with 400 e-copies?

When meeting with the curriculum and instruction department Roxanne shared that they had no use for e copies, yet the central office ordered these copies. The waste of resources given the lack of attention to what those closest to the work required made no sense to Roxanne or her social studies department. In the end, after several rounds, the operations department agreed to purchasing the books for all schools. Ultimately, the right decision was made.

Knowing students

It is common knowledge that too many high school teachers believe they are responsible for teaching content and not students. Teachers who are content driven rather than oriented toward helping their students are a major problem. The disconnect between students and teachers in many ways can be seen as rooted in poor school administration that models weak rapport and fails to reward educators who seek to build healthy relationships with all those who are under their care. It is easy for teachers to develop and encourage those students who are like and liked by their teachers; it is a much different thing when differences in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability are present. Fred knows his students. He is not an administrator of a school but a leader for his students and staff. When students come to PHS they experience a radical change. Typically, PHS receives 25 to 30 transfer students each year from other high schools where they are or have failed for some reason or another. They come with a host of
defenses against boredom and being bullied; most notably an attitude of alienation, disengagement.

In the fall of the year of this study, PHS received double the same amount of transfers as incoming 9th graders. The majority of these students transferred with little if any credits and as a group possessed a very low grade point average (GPA). This was a new phenomenon for PHS. After Fred reviewed the transcripts, he noted that these students had not changed much over their years in middle school.

We are catching the kids that the comprehensives are systematically moving out. These kids aren’t just coming because they discovered us. They are systematically moving them out, because of graduation rates or test scores or whatever it might happen to be.

Additionally, PHS had twice the number of transfers at the semester break which was abnormal.

Fred had to respond promptly to this unexpected volume of students knowing they needed classes immediately and had come to PHS with significant challenges if they were to graduate on time. Despite the influx of students, no new resources were provided from the central office.

Working within these constraints, Fred began integrating the students into the PHS routines and acculturating them to its norms. Every student must attend an orientation process prior to entering PHS. Part of the process involves a group interview in Fred’s office where he has created a warm, inviting environment comfortable for such interactions. There are posters made by PHS students, an overstuffed couch, and low lighting. The interview consists of asking each student the following question, Knowing yourself as a learner and what you experienced to date, why do you think you will be successful at PHS? Fred also meets with parents for questions.
The information is shared with his faculty so that together they can figure out a way to address not just the academic needs of their students, but the social emotional needs. Additionally, PHS faculty recognizes that for many of their students, physical needs must be included in the mix if students are to be successful.

Reluctance to Simplify

HROs are complex organizations, highly technical, with a dependence on human capital. HROs “obsess about the question of what they ignore” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 95). Reluctance to simplify highlights “blindspots” that people have where they need to “see” through multiple perspectives in order to understand what is below the surface. They “notice more, and ignore less” (p. 95). Reluctance to simplify captures those with differing opinions and adversarial perspectives and permits skeptics to present their “point of view.” It allows for principals to seek out cynics within the organization in order to yield a more mindful outcome. Eck (2011) refers to districts focusing their attention on a “post-mortem evaluation of performance on state and national standardized assessments” (p. 38). The concern from schools is that annual assessments arrive at the schoolhouse too late in order to make “real time adjustments.”

The audit below indicated that faculty in PHS discourages simplification as different views are valued, questioning and inquiry are respected, challenging the status quo are applauded, and there is a culture accepting differing viewpoints within PHS that supports new learning and the consideration of contradictory perspectives. People at PHS reported feeling free to listen carefully to the viewpoints of others and bring up problems as they occur.

Trust is part of an organizational culture that is an important feature as building capacity within an organization. It supports interactions within the organization for which reduces any uncertainty (Cosner, 2009). It allows for principals to model norms of interaction and support to
encourage collaboration. It is an important dimension that contributes to teacher’s knowledge and abilities that enhance student outcomes knowing that any conflict with disagreement will be examined and included in a principal’s analysis. It contributes to the organizational capacity.

*Table 6*

*Reluctance to Simplify*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>PHS</th>
<th>Roxanne</th>
<th>CHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People are encouraged to express different views.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning is encouraged.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We strive to challenge the status quo.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People feel free to bring up problems.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are not attacked when they report information that could interrupt operations.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People show considerable respect for one another.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People listen carefully, and it is rare that someone’s view goes unheard.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When something unexpected happens, people spend more time analyzing than advocating their view.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People generally deepen their analyses to better grasp the nature of the problems that arise.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People around here take nothing for granted.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People trust each other.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skeptics are highly valued.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In both schools, there appeared a strong belief or commitment to not take advantage of others. PHS faculty noted that skeptics may need attention in order to improve PHS’s capability for mindfulness.

**Critical colleagues**

Divergent viewpoints are welcomed at PHS as part of their norms are for all (i.e., teachers and students) to “step up, step back, stay involved, trust the process, and to participate wholly, expect and accept discomfort and non-closure, and speak from “I” not “they.” Fred has some curmudgeons on staff where there is a clear contrast in viewpoint, yet Fred welcomes differing perspectives.

they don’t prepare enough for their classes. They do good stuff and in some other place, they would be exceptional teachers. But they're so absorbed with the “whole” of the school and with the students. And for those teachers it's their lives too, their lives outside -- you know they are parents with young kids, things like that. They don’t have enough time to prepare as well as they should, and they know that, we talk about it. There’s a little too much winging it as I call it. And then there's an accountability thing where it's -- part of its supervisory, my supervision. And part of it is the philosophy of the school where we talk about the students a lot about their balance between freedom and responsibility. We do have a couple of teachers who -- they too much fall into the like “well this is my life, I can do what I want.” I mean Pete is sort of being the extreme example because he's been there so long. He feels like he can do whatever he wants. And I keep saying to him, no! That's not who we are. And maybe you could do that 15 years ago, but that's not who we are now. It’s not that you don’t have a lot of freedom to do a lot of different things. He wanted to start a class last year -- it was for second semester. It
was this gender studies class that he has no reason to teach because that’s not his area for sure... But we had a discussion, nobody on the staff supported him doing it. But he got himself into a big tizzy that I was being the dictator.

Despite Fred’s concerns about this teacher (i.e., the problems that arise because Pete’s style of teaching does not fully support or align with the needs of the students), Fred sees other strengths and contributions. Pete’s practice as a teacher can’t be reduced to a single issue. Fred does not ignore what is problematic and the ways Pete’s choices about teaching are too often mistaken. Fred’s work as instructional leader is not a simple task given a teacher like Pete. Pete is not unique, and frankly if Fred was to endeavor and succeed in pushing Pete out of the school, in all likelihood he would simply be replaced by another teacher who exhibited the same problems or maybe even more. Fred’s strategy was one of balancing strengths and weaknesses across the staff and pushing norms of inquiry and open dialogue to bring change. He has group processes, developed norms, yet there remains a place for autonomy that teachers appear to need at least some degree of, if they are to contribute meaningfully to the school’s mission.

More than a mission

Many administrators do not share the level of intensity, the level of urgency, or have the same commitment to mission as Roxanne. She often refers to herself as being “hard wired” around a hyper sense of urgency for social justice, especially for students. She states her staff does not always understand her commitment to excellence and her life driven work and purpose of cultivating a community. She frequently states, “I don’t run a school, I pastor a community.” Her expectations of students who leave CHS are to continue this mission wherever they land. When speaking to undergraduate students from a local university in the spring she affirmed, “At CHS you are living Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream.” She is very serious and intentional and
will not retreat from this mission driven work. She is an avid reader of research, books, and a
soon to be author. She is keenly aware that everybody does not share in the mission of creating a
society or building a community that is just and fair. Often, when she is misunderstood she is
often scrutinized by central office personnel or colleagues who fail to appreciate her work as a
scholar or inaccurately name the mission driven work that she has accomplished. It is in these
ways that undue stress enters into her efforts. Further, the demands that arise from increased
technical compliance with accountability driven mandates contribute much to the competing
tensions of her work. The toll on Roxanne physically and emotionally is visible.

She speaks loudly when mandates are unjust, when students are marginalized, or when
her values are being questioned or compromised. As a strong, righteous human being, others
may be intimidated by her knowledge, her intensity, or her firm convictions. As a result, people
tend to misread or make assumptions about her. She has reflected and discussed with me how
some of her staff is fearful of her. She believes such feelings are due to holding differing values.
As a social justice leader, Roxanne understands the courage it takes to properly execute
leadership through this lens. One reason why some staff may find her intimidating is because
they desire a leader who is amiable and warm all the time, but leadership requires discussing
mistakes and having honest conversations about what it is that is individuals have done or are
doing that is contributing to problems. Roxanne understands that for some of her staff this is
“just a job.” She refers to her own “blind spots” as she attempts to understand various
perspectives, unpack perceptions, as well as engage in thoughtful consideration of her own
weaknesses in order to improve as a human being.

At some point you just you grow impatient, you can’t be intense and have a sense of
urgency of something that you believe is fundamental to lifesaving, fundamental to
democracy, fundamental to just people’s well-being and run around chit-chatting, taking
that lightly and laughing at the foibles.

It is challenging work to maintain openness and seek multiple perspectives. She shared a
recent interaction that she had with a member of an athletic association. The group had been
working sometime with a colleague, district office administrator, on a project. Tensions had been
building. She approached her colleague from the association and stated,

I wanted to touch base with you about the interaction between you and the Director
today. I was present at the fall meeting during the uncomfortable exchange between the
two of you and have some understanding about the level of discomfort that resulted from
the issue that was aired publicly that had not been fully vetted privately first.

Roxanne explained that she understood the feelings of disrespect. Yet, she believed the lack of
professional decorum was escalating the conflict. Privately she told her colleague,

Today was a different experience. I was personally offended by your actions that cut the
Director off mid-sentence, complete with a dismissive hand gesture. It appeared outwardly
intolerant of his leadership. Beyond his title, he is a human being who has dedicated
himself to the same work to which we have all committed ourselves. The manner in which
you responded to him made me feel very uncomfortable and disrespected by association.
He is my colleague and my brother and he did not deserve to be dismissed merely for
repeating himself.

She elected to use such plain language for a number of reasons. She explained to me that

I am constantly reminded of my privileges and inherent power and have to work daily to
ensure that I am giving fair voice to all (and I frequently fall short. I am a work in
progress for sure). I have benefitted by the gentle outreach (and sometimes not so gentle)
of folks who have provided me feedback when I have failed to be duly respectful. Even though my intentions are pure and good, I am reminded that I have responsibility not only for my intent but my impact. I told him, it is in the spirit of brotherhood that I shared this message. “Your response to the Director today not only added to a legacy of disrespect for people of color, but injured our collective collegiality. Of course disagreements are inevitable, but we can disagree respectfully—especially in public settings.”

Roxanne readily admits she is a work in progress, never quite at perfection, recognizing each endeavor could have been done a little bit better. Yet she is fearless about confronting truth in hopes of elevating the consciousness of others at becoming more sensitive of their words and the impact words may have on people.

Deference to Expertise

Roxanne relies on a shortlist of trusted confidants to “bounce ideas” off of. She has stated on many occasions that she loses sight of her own levels of intensity, She also recognizes although she does not personally experience her intensity, she sees evidence of her impact on others around her. She runs big ideas through filters of those she trusts and those who are familiar with her work. These tend to be colleagues who are culturally competent and have high levels of social intelligence and are also those who understand her intensity and help her to translate it to actions that will be best received.

On the other hand, Fred has students engaged in processes at PHS when decisions are made that have an impact on them. He compares his experiences working with a planning team at the district level versus working with his teachers and students at the building level. He intentionally does things to ensure that all students are engaged in the process. On a recent occasion, he posted group thinking in the main hallway which was visible to all students, where
they had an opportunity to comment and provide feedback. Student voice at PHS is never an afterthought, but always included in the process. It is a democratic lens through which decisions are made. According to Fred, students are the experts about students.

Looking at the audit below it was evident that both schools are committed to doing their work well. When reviewing the results with principals, the low *It is easy to get expert assistance when something comes up that they don’t know how to handle* was seen as connected with the multiple initiatives for change going on within the district that were largely unsupported. Both principals felt that many times there is no “expert” at the central office to help support faculty with the directives. Further, both schools experience unusual occurrences, yet in an age of accountability, these occurrences are never the focus of any discussion.

Fred mentioned the challenging environments that students face as a result of dysfunctional home lives, yet their resilient drive to attend school was something Fred believed to be phenomenal. Creating a safe environment for his students, however, clearly exemplified how PHS “owns” a problem. There is so much out of an administrator’s control, yet both school leaders understood these complexities and impressively made decisions that were best for students despite unordinary circumstances. Fred in particular recognized the expertise of his students as being central to their ability to take control of their own lives.

The flexibility CHS faculty reported experiencing during state testing by relying on the expertise of those in law enforcement portrayed this schools understanding of listening and changing normal procedures based on the occurrence of an unexpected event. This event had the potential of being a very serious consequence that migrated to others in the city in order to act accordingly.
Consequently, this audit demonstrates both schools’ ability to “localize problems and limit their spread” (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 101). This audit demonstrates both schools’ capacity for mindfulness as their scores are strong.

Table 7

*Deference to Expertise*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fred</th>
<th>PHS</th>
<th>Roxanne</th>
<th>CHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People are committed to doing their work well.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People respect one another’s professional practice.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in this school value expertise and experience over seniority.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this school, the people most qualified to make decisions make them.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If something out of the ordinary happens, people know who has the expertise to respond.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People typically “own” a problem until it is resolved.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is easy to obtain expert assistance when something comes up that we don’t know how to handle.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Experts: Seeing students in another light*

I talk to students when I am visiting schools. Students told me that Fred is not like other principals they have had. “He’s different.” “He knows my name” or “We can just come into his
office any time.” Fred’s office is a safe space for students to talk, to read, to write, and reflect. Fred wants his office and school to be a sanctuary for students. He knows his students.

One of the more troubling outcomes of the push for academic accountability, according to Fred, is the lack of recognition given to how challenging some home environments can be and the subsequent importance of nurturing student resilience. Fred shared a story of a young lady, 15 years old, who demonstrated incredible resilience and attended school daily despite a severely dysfunctional home life. Jessica had been in and out of foster care. Most recently she had been living with a boyfriend who had been released from jail, but had moved back with her mom, who is a meth addict, to help her out. She had lived for a time with her father, but that did not last long he had a drinking problem and would “be passed out for days and just you know couldn’t get himself back up, she's cleaning up vomit on the floor when she gets up in the morning. It's like she's 70 years old doing this.” Her father also “emotionally abused her and just told her how she was a failure, she was a fat pig,” that was her words. He told her no one was ever going to like her and “you're just going to fail in life. And yet she's pulled herself back up and just listening to her and her being able to articulate this, it's just, it's pretty phenomenal.” About the only person in her life that had provided long term stability was “her grandmother but her grandmother is really ill and her grandmother tries but she can’t give her that much.” The role that Fred described for himself and the school was to be,

a safe space for her and that’s what she and I had been talking about, was how to use this space so that she can rebuild this foundation she needs to be able to get herself back. I mean, she’s a damaged person to that extent and she’s completely, completely stressed to the max and is experiencing panic attacks…. Part of it is we've created an environment
where kids begin to say hey, this is what's happening to me, I can take more control of my life.

Fred’s practice of leadership that recognizes the expertise of students, the central role that they play for them to learn should not be dismissed. It provides the critical ingredient or process in how he framed and enacted the mission of PHS. Further, the expertise of students, built into the very core of the work being undertaken by all school participants, was explained as necessary to resilience discussed previously in the findings.

*Flexibility*

Despite all schools having standard procedures regarding emergencies, there are always unanticipated surprises that produce more mindful thinking. There needs to be flexible responses in order to cope with the circumstance at hand.

During the state assessment period, Roxanne received a police order that CHS was to go into lockdown. It was 11:00 AM. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported to the city’s police department that an alleged gunman heading to CHS. The police arrived at the building shortly after sending the lockdown orders. Following procedures, staff members were assigned to exterior doorways and given a picture of the potential gunman. Nobody externally could enter CHS with the exception of one guarded door. As reported a young man was on his way to shoot and kill a young female student currently enrolled in the school. The detectives were in the school’s office when they received a call informing them of a potential location for the suspect. They bolted, heading immediately to where someone had identified the perpetrator. The police were able to apprehend the man and confiscate the loaded fire arm that he was carrying.

During the entire time, students remained in their classrooms as they were completing their state assessment. Even though police confirmed the apprehension of the perpetrator, it
remained unknown whether he had been acting alone. Roxanne kept students in the building throughout the day. Since students continued to arrive to school throughout the day, those students entered the building using the method of reverse evacuation. Roxanne also decided that no student would be allowed to leave campus for lunch and she explained to the cafeteria personnel that everyone in the building would have to be fed.

Further, as the day progressed, Roxanne communicated what she learned to families via automated phone dialer. Her community trusts her to report all possible details to families early and often. As a leader of CHS for years, Roxanne’s credibility and trust with her families proved and communication strategies proved effective as there were minimal calls back to the facility.

The remainder of the day was calm at CHS.

At the conclusion of the day Roxanne called her faculty together to debrief the day’s events. The purpose of the meeting was to both explore what her staff thought could have been done better in handling the situation as well as recognize all that they had done right. In addition, to releasing a lot of excitement or energy given the stress associated with a lockdown, Roxanne brought their attention back to the bigger picture of what they as a school were doing for their students. She noted that “We didn’t even need to take the van out for pick-ups this year (in reference to student attendance during exams). This is because of how you are messaging the importance of being here on testing days.” The meeting closed by a collective commitment to return to normal concerns as well as next steps that would be taken to ensure student and faculty wellness and safety were protected. “Tomorrow is a professional development day. I will give you a little grace. We will begin at 8:30 with breakfast. The more we can be productive tomorrow, the better. Today everyone did well. Our school has a collective social intelligence that is profound” was the comment that ended the meeting.
Resilience: Rewards and Challenges

In general, principals must be resilient to survive the demands of the job. There was a common theme involving the negative influence on school operations given a dysfunctional central office culture, strategies of communication, and poorly informed decisions. The intent of the central office appeared to be largely reacting to or directed by notions of fear. Principals’ strategies of coping could be seen as aimed at buffering their buildings as a result of such authority or exercise of power. Those who are members of the district office frequently messaged to principals one way, but the actions reflected a different set of values. Principals had to be resilient to survive the demands of the job. While not evident in the above description of their work, I believe some of the challenges for principals, what created much of the need for their resilience, sprang out of what was occurring at the district level. There has been significant leadership turnover at high levels within the organization, people jockeying for positions prior to a new superintendent arriving, elevated positions while principals are requested to take furlough days, despite multiple public statements acknowledging that central office leaders are there to support principals.

Despite demonstrating resilience within this building, Fred shared his disappointment with me on a number of occasions with what he was seeing happening in meetings at the district level. While he shared his concerns with me, he also felt some guilt for not speaking up when he saw such problems. For example, there was a planning meeting for professional development that went against his core beliefs. Fred confessed that the principals “caved as a group.” His guilt was placated somewhat, however, as he referred to what happened as “institutional learned helplessness.” A culture of fear permeated the district as evident in principals having lost confidence with their own ideas, being unwilling to speak up, or accepting the central office’s
decisions. Fred expressed his frustration to me and explained that “sometimes you have to walk away.”

I’m not one of these “this too will pass” kind of people, that is gonna pass. I mean, it’s gonna go away in some way. We have to live through it. We have to figure out what we’re gonna do about it, but we shouldn’t spend a whole lot of time worrying about it and he’s saying oh there’s so much more, there’s so much more, we have to get into it deeper and I was like ugh… It’s like fuck you. You know, I’m tuning out at this point because we’re the only school that’s gonna refuse. People like Sue tell me, “you have to do this, it’s the law.” That’s like her overall thing. “It’s the law.” It’s like okay so what’s next? Then you’ll be told to reprimand me.

The stress originating from the central office does not provide principals with support. Rather it tended to add to what was most ridiculous in terms of the demands that these administrators were required to manage. Much of what came from the central office was undifferentiated supports that ignored principal need or expertise. Further, insistence on compliance as the primary mode for assessing how schools are being is of little help to principals other than conveying clearly what it is that is expected. Compliance, however, does not assure that the greater good is receiving attention nor does it result in schools that are smoothly running. There is also a central office premise that every school operates the same and falls under the same umbrella, despite ongoing conversations and attempts to inform such decision makers that this is not the case. There appeared, too often, to be too little consideration regarding principal workload, demands on their resources, or what I would refer to as simple common sense.

When leadership dictates only from the top of an organization, it will eventually fail due to dysfunction or misdirection. A key example of the degree to which the district office was
disconnected with the daily experience of building principals was shared by Roxanne. The district sent an email reminder to principals who did not make the June, 2012 deadline of having all of their students scheduled for the following year. Roxanne disgustedly responded.

Another example of institutional ignorance. We can’t get data, especially on ELL, quick enough to get students fully scheduled by the district timelines especially since they registered middle schools so late, our ELL all have to be hand scheduled as do many of our special education students. Careful cohort planning and in the case of ELL, placement based on our Edge diagnostics is required.

Rather than publicly sending reminders, perhaps the approach of understanding a principal’s perspective and actively seeking out answers would prove to be a noteworthy effort.

Shifting to rewards, I wish to again use an example provided by Roxanne. Perhaps no statement or experience present in the gathered data better captures the rewards of the work as well as following this case. She sent her staff a memo after noticing a high school’s food drive during the holidays.

More than 7 out of 10 CHS families are living at or below the poverty line as indicated by our FRL. Research shows that these numbers are often low water marks as FRL often goes under reported at the high school level. CHS kids are incredibly generous and service oriented. I have found that often give even when they can’t afford to give. Drumming up a campaign to collect from this population may cause some stress for those students who see their reflection in these efforts. While we work hard to maintain the anonymity of our families we have to recognize that this is a close community and kids know each other. As a charity recipient much of my childhood, it was not comfortable going to school and knowing that my peers knew that I needed their help. While I was
grateful for the help, there was a certain level of humiliation I experienced despite the
goodness and kindness of those around me. I know everyone may not share this
orientation but I do want to be mindful that being a recipient of generosity may cause a
different kind of pain. We work hard to develop first-class citizenship for all kids—I
want to exercise some cautious mindfulness here.

In reading this message I could hear a warning or concern about how students might react to the
goodness and compassion of those around them thinking that is atypical in a society that prides
itself on charitable acts. What most impressed me and what I believed her faculty heard was
praise for their efforts, as well as understanding and hope given a shared experience. Roxanne
and Fred both know what the fruit of their labor is and both do not have to look far to see how it
is that what they are doing daily helps their students and teachers reach for success.

Becoming More Mindful

As the evaluator of both principals, my assumptions were that both administrators
exhibited mindful behaviors based on observations, knowledge of their work, discussions at
regional meetings, during our one on one visits, or during district leadership meetings prior to
conducting this research. Roxanne had shared that prior to me evaluating her, her wellness was
significantly compromised and impacted. She has openly discussed that she would be doubled
over in pain at the thought of attending a district meeting, or emotionally depressed where simply
going up was challenging. She would see a therapist to discuss her challenges working in a
system where her values were constantly compromised, yet her passion for what she created at
CHS was her dream. She created a culture and an ethos that focused on humanity and justice.
Her students are resilient as many come from backgrounds where they are the bread winner,
homeless, caretaker, or mother.
Although one goal of the study was to increase the mindfulness of two principals, Roxanne already perseverates and is continuously reflecting as she attempts to understand and make sense of district decisions that greatly impact her school and inevitably the marginalized students she serves. Her ongoing reflections provide insight as to how central office continually places demands on principals without concern surrounding their wellness or having an understanding of the true role of a principal. Roxanne speaks only in terms of truths and is challenged by those making decisions based on no evidence, no experience as a principal or simply operating in an insular world. Those making decisions limit her ability to support the system at large as she is constantly buffering the ridiculous requests in order to protect her staff so they can serve the most vulnerable, marginalized students. Simply identifying what happened during our state assessment with evacuations and the FBI’s presence had a significant implication for the daily operation at CHS. Despite these interruptions, Roxanne was mindful of the safety of her staff first and foremost.

Roxanne has shared that as a result of her having a supervisor that understand her values and supports the direction she has taken her building has resulted in increased health both physically and mentally. This study has increased her platform for sharing her work and increased her well-being. She is less fearful of being scrutinized or not being able to openly reflect on her thoughts, challenges, stressors that are an ongoing test of her resiliency as a human being. Despite not believing that Roxanne has increased in mindfulness, this type of reflection surrounding her own well-being allowed for me to recognize my own mindfulness as I work with administrators to buffer the daily obstacles that disengage them from the insularity of the central office.
Fred has found the importance of his own well-being. He is more mindful surrounding his own health and has incorporated soft yoga into his weekly activities. While I believe Fred, too, exhibited mindfulness prior to this study, he has openly discussed with great scrutiny the challenges and disconnect of administrators with central office personnel. Despite Fred openly sharing his discontent or gratitude, he has developed an ability to be more critical knowing his thinking has significant value and merit to me as his supervisor.

Both principals agreed that there is an institutional fear of speaking up because someone might say something not well received and or not in agreement with the powers that be. Roxanne and Fred believe decisions are not made based on what is best for students in urban education, but based on preserving one’s position. Fred reflected,

I agree we have to continually ask questions and question our own certainties. There is such a disconnect between central office and schools (and students) that it is somewhat amazing they get anything right. People don’t even want to hear (or can’t hear) real truths about the lack of success of students, the number dropping out, the level and degree of mental illnesses we see every day, the impact of the recession on families and students, the number of students being pushed out of comprehensive high schools so numbers look better, the inability to rethink the whole concept of high school and how it could change to better serve more students, the growing number of students barely making it through.

Both administrators agreed that the system appears to be largely about blame. We often even hear administrators blaming students for their inability to be successful, yet our jobs are supposed to be to support every student. Throughout this study it is evident that we get lost in the ongoing demands and mandates that remove us from serving students.
Throughout the study, as shared in the above examples, knowledge based error were evident (Zao & Olivera, 2006). Knowledge based mistakes transpire when people fail to analyze problems or recognize that there may be associations between the components. If diagnosed well when analyzing errors, organizations or schools can benefit as they recognize flaws in procedures that may occur or additional training that may be necessary to prevent failure. One of the challenges when working with schools is that error reporting is seldom encouraged and may contribute toward a culture of fear or blame whereas in HROs the reporting of errors is encouraged and often celebrated. Schools tend to be seen as lacking in expertise if they report unfavorable outcomes that may lead to a punitive action. In these types of blaming cultures, errors are punished versus being seen as potential learning for growth. Zhao and Olivera, (2006) refer to this as psychological safety. They contend, “Team with high levels of psychological safety are likely to alleviate individuals’ concerns about others’ reactions to disclosing and discussing errors” (p. 1015).

The study helped to build trust. The three of us were reflecting as leaders and discussing the uncertainties we face and how we must provide coping mechanisms knowing that we need to be mindful of decisions that impact children. How do we openly discuss, make change as a result of adults being fallible, yet do so mindfully? Fred shared a quote from Schultz (2011), Being Wrong: Adventures in the margin of error,

Of all the things we are wrong about, this idea of error might well top the list. It is our eta-mistake: we are wrong about what it means to be wrong far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err crucial to human cognition. Far from being a moral flaw, it is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities: empathy, optimism, imagination, conviction, and courage. And far from being a mark of
indifference or intolerance, wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change. Thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world.

Fred’s reflection on the culture of an urban district where we work as one that moves as quickly as possible, making decisions incredibly fast, and implementing with no accountability for deep discussion or significant implementation or planning. He shared, “What makes it so dangerous is that the historic institutional memory is then erased when the decision turns out to be wrong, a mistake, or just utterly fails.”

The system is not set up for deep discussion of error, analysis of decisions, concern for the impact on others, or an inquiry process that allows time to vet ideas through the proper channels. As a result, many wrong decisions are made which lead to significant failure inevitably causing a reduction in resources for our students. Ironically when students make mistakes or encounter errors, we teach and inform as this is a sign of learning.

As we identify the ongoing demands for administrators moving into the 21st century where accountability appears to be what holding everyone’s “feet to the fire,” I urge future leaders to consider the importance of humanity prior to compliance. While everyone should be held to high standards and accountable, through this research I have experienced compromised wellness and a culture of fear which will never allow for an organization to move forward in order to serve students well. We are asking school leaders to do more with less, resolve problems at the schoolhouse, increase their capacity to counsel students and staff, and buffer central office demands. Fred theorized that

for administrators in a system, to me it goes back to systems that are set up to perpetuate themselves and we can either let the system direct us or we can be the ones who are
pushing it forward and reflecting and changing and all those good things…but when dysfunction comes in, it makes it even worse because it [the system] really needs that dysfunction to continue and then it sucks people into it because people are human. So we end up doing things that are one, two, three, four levels removed from what’s really important. If this is about students, then why aren’t we filtering what we’re doing through that? If it’s about teachers, why aren’t we filtering it through that lens?

This research has pointed to ongoing requests from principals that are often the result of central office dysfunction or people being far removed from the principalship. Furthermore this is exacerbated by state assessments, increased accountability, and limited resources. Both principals in this study want to be held to high standards and accountable for increased student outcomes, yet our system is not set up to provide the resources necessary as compliance drives district mandates.

In order to accurately reflect on the principalship, central office leaders must deeply dive into the everyday duties and demands of principals if we are to yield more accurate, reliable schools that lead to positive student outcomes. I would further argue the importance of having central office leaders with building principal experience. This assists in building credibility with those in the field dealing with the ongoing demands of the job.

Having stated the above call, I also noted that situational awareness is critical as a principal. Like HROs, principals who are attentive to the front line where the real work occurs can do much to mitigate the problems in schools that I’ve identified. When discussing sensitivity to operations Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) contend, “When people have well-developed situational awareness, they can make the continuous adjustments that prevent errors from accumulating and enlarging” (p. 12). The day of CHS’s gas leak well-known rules were wrongly applied. The plan
directed to send staff and students back into the building was inappropriate and a rule-based mistake. In this situation familiar rules and procedures overrode what was inevitably the wrong decision; sending students and staff back into the building when the odor was still lurking. Those on the ground have situational awareness that contribute to error reduction. Gawande (2010), discusses the importance of trusting those on the ground as they are closest to the error. Autocracy should not dictate how to respond, but at some point, allow for principals to lead with some autonomy as they are nearest the problem.

No, the real lesson is that under conditions of true complexity—where the knowledge required exceeds that of any individual and unpredictability reigns—efforts to dictate every step from the center will fail. People need room to act and adapt. Yet they cannot succeed as isolated individuals, either—that is anarchy. Instead, they require a seemingly contradictory mix of freedom and expectation—expectation to coordinate, for example, and also to measure progress toward common goals (Gawande, 2007, p.78).
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this action research was to a) explore and identify how reliability and resilience were evident in the daily routines and practices of two high school principals, b) investigate the values, structures, and procedures in both high schools that assisted with or inhibited these principals to lead in ways that yield reliable student outcomes, and c) examine how the study assisted both principals in reflecting and strengthening their leadership through more mindful practices, where collective mindfulness in these schools was heightened.

There is no dispute that the job of the principalship is forever demanding, increasingly stressful, and very different than even five years ago. The age of accountability, the unfunded mandates, the ridiculous compliance driven requests are making this profession untenable and compromising the wellness of those leading our schools. Administrators discuss “taking the heat, putting out brush fires, getting burned by decisions, stopping rumors that spread like wildfire, looking for fire where they spot smoke, facing explosive situations, and watching the fireworks at board meetings” (Weick, 1996, p. 565). Despite these ongoing challenges, Roxanne and Fred, the two key participants in this study, demonstrated a profound commitment that is mission driven with solid core convictions that allow them to pursue their work as they are steadfast to students in urban education. The problem is that these ongoing fires have the potential to lead to student failure. On all fronts, this disturbs Roxanne and Fred, yet they are activists for new learning and potential change.

I began this research by exploring and identifying how reliability and resilience were evident in the daily lives of two high school principals. I reviewed the literature on HROs as mindful organizations that are “reliability-seeking” and “alert to unanticipated possibilities” in
very complex, adaptable environments (Bellamy et al., 2005; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). I would argue that schools are complex entities needing to adapt to unforgiving circumstances. HROs are organizations having the flexibility to adapt as a result of the current demands that require a change in course (Weick et al., 1999). In conducting this research I further examined the demands and rewards that influence decisions as principals are continually “putting out fires” and concluded with how their participation in this study assisted principals in reflection and becoming more mindful as leaders in urban education.

My hypothesis regarding both school leaders was accurate as I believe both have a tendency to be mindful based on the evidence from observations, district meetings, and one-on-one conversations as well as the data gathered from their staff through the audits. Both administrators in this study are wary of district decisions as these decisions have led to considerable challenges and ongoing rhetoric. Hoy et al. (2006) reiterates, “Overall, individual mindfulness is a habit of mind that continuously seeks disconfirming evidence to test assumptions. Mindful administrators know that “believing is seeing,” and they are on guard—wary of the obvious and searching for “the danger not yet arisen” (p. 229). Both administrators were well aware of insincere, superficial information provided at the district level, yet continued to mobilize their schools in order to make sense of the information knowing that they were responsible for student outcomes and the overall well-being of those they served. When a sense of complacency exists, they asked questions spotting these early warning signals in order to make “real time” adjustments as evidenced in my findings. Finally, both leaders contributed to the organization as a whole by being a principal representative on district wide committees that address inequities, social justice, and inaccurate information shared from central office to the schoolhouse. They attempted to shed light on holistic concerns regarding leadership in urban
education. Their unwavering commitment is one example of their life-long, courageous work knowing that education is not a job “for the weak-willed” (Delpit, 2012, p. 194).

The chapter in this dissertation proceeds with a discussion of the practical, theoretical, and substantive significance of the study’s findings. A section on limitations is then offered, followed by the last section that provides the recommendation for future research and concluding reflection.

**Study Significance**

Secondary principals are struggling to meet the demands of their jobs. There is an expectation that their expertise provides solutions to the ongoing problems and challenges they are confronted with daily. The demands on principals from the federal and state governments, the district, down to the community to which they answer have significant impact on their ability to do the job. This action research proposal has practical, theoretical, and substantive significance.  

*Practical Significance*

HROs perform under very trying conditions and are reliable as a result of the ongoing training and professional development to ensure that highly complex systems are understood to improve outcomes and avoid failure. As experiences are learned, negative interactions may be reduced as these interactions become familiar. This does not by any means indicate that accidents will be prevented, but helps to contribute to avoiding the possibility of such accidents. Schools are equally complex systems and attempt to operate efficiently in order to produce positive student outcomes and reduce failures. Making less rigid decisions and broadening the perspectives of those within the organization will enhance the reliability of the organization, which could potentially include schools. The theoretical significance of this study centers on its contribution to literature on building schools into reliability-seeking organizations. Redundancy
within the school organization allows for an increase in information which, when dealing with student outcomes, may allow for those within the organization to access more information to assist in helping students. Traditionally in school settings our environment is extremely structured and we are reluctant to admit to mistakes, seek the expertise of others, or deprivatize practice. Currently, much of how schools operate can be seen as antithetical to how those in HROs perform their work. The ability of principals in both schools to admit to making mistakes and allowing their faculty to do so as well suggests other educators can do so as well. Blame does not have to be a critical part of how schools operate nor should it be considered a natural or healthy part of a school’s culture.

The study aided participants in understanding the complexities of the principalship and how two principals employed mindfulness in their roles as leaders. In the age of accountability, school operations are under constant change and being responsive is critical for success. There is a new teacher evaluation tool as well as a new principal evaluation tool being implemented this year that will have major influence on the work and rewards of educators. Both of these tools highlight the complexities of both jobs and create a system that has increased accountability based on federal mandates and political pressures.

The skills identified and developed within this study are viewed as assisting principals in handling errors made in educating students, sharing information with all members of the organization, and increasing flexibility when making decisions. The dissertation sought to support development of expertise in both school leaders. As the demands of the principalship are continuously increasing and becoming more complex, this study assisted principals in becoming more comfortable handling the unexpected and tapping into the expertise of others to meet the daily challenges they encounter.
As the supervisor of principals, coming to understand these practical issues and collaborating with principals has had additional benefits given the work that I do with other principals. My own appreciation for the complexities of school leadership has developed. In discussing issues of reliability with both principals, I have been aided as the study structured ongoing communication that was transparent, reflective, and allowed for dialogue about improving my relationship. I have come to better perceive the ways central office directives contribute to dysfunction. The study has helped me to build credibility with my principals as I have begun to more attentively structure my work around removing barriers for those working “on the ground and in the trenches.” Stated most succinctly, this action research proved to support and encourage my efforts of working with principals in order to move toward a more mindful organizational system.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the importance of principal wellness as leaders in the 21st century. The demands of the job have increased to a point of becoming untenable. This should not go unnoticed as we continually place additional burdens and unfunded mandates on the plates of our leaders. While I cannot argue that there were health outcomes for either principal involved in the study, I believe I have become much more sensitive to issues of wellness. I recognize that role I have in conveying expectations that help or hinder how principals behave that reflects a priority on wellness for students, staff, and administrators.

*Theoretical Significance*

High reliability theory proclaims that organizations contribute to the prevention of accidents and use reliability enhancing strategies in order to produce positive outcomes. Organizations must adjust and cope to complex systems and unexpected exchanges. Having tightly coupled technologies without flexibility may escalate into catastrophic failure without the
possibility of any recovery. Applying redundancy allows for systems to have backups and signs of warning that may reduce failure as a possible consequence.

An additional attribute of HROs focuses on a culture of reliability. Those within HROs share operating procedures that allow for autonomy within a system in order to resolve problems before they escalate into disasters. There is a balance between centralization and decentralization of power (Rijpma, 1997, p. 18). The culture of reliability allows for those within the organization to respond to emerging problems. The culture is based on trust and collegiality and will often flex from being tightly coupled to a more loosely coupled system.

Accident prevention is the goal for HROs, and for schools’ accident prevention, it includes improving student outcomes in order to prevent failure. At times district bureaucracy inhibits learning, restricts communication within the organization, and decentralizes structures within schools, which presents challenges for principals. The goal for schools and HROs is that learning from successes as well as failures is quick and responsive as a result of flexibility within the school or organization.

This study contributes to the field of education and educational leadership through shared reflections and knowledge of high school principals in order to employ strategies that are consistent with those of HROs. This study addresses the gap of how educational organizations deal with the complexities of the work and how resiliency is pivotal to the success of the organization as a whole. The findings of this study assists evaluators of principals in understanding how HRO attributes can contribute to the field of education. By studying high school principals, the issues of high reliability helps to offer insight into the current practices in public schools that may or may not hinder the achievement of student outcomes.
The significance of this research should cause central office to pause and reevaluate their supports to principals as the leaders operating our schools. It is critical as we move into the 21st century that central office takes the necessary time to be mindful of those “on the ground” by recognizing the importance of the principal’s voice as a key contributor to the success of urban districts. The findings from this research highlighted calamities that principals encountered that are unnecessary and lack mindful decision making “from above.” Despite these decisions there is an expectation that principals are instructional leaders first and foremost, yet central office actions are absent of any true understanding of the demands and ongoing unexpected requests that come from their office or have a deep understanding of the unexpected events that remove principals from being instructional leaders. Regardless of Central Office Transformation efforts (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton; 2010) which I applaud, many of those making the decisions at the district level lack what I would refer to as a true understanding of what it is like to “sit in the chair” or have been so far removed from the principalship and the age of accountability that their experiences are not applicable in leading today’s schools.

Moving forward I would encourage district leaders and superintendents to operate in a less insular world, begin to notice their leaders in an open and receptive fashion, and be mindful of the impact their actions are having on the wellness and well-being of the organization as a whole. Schools need to “simplify less and see more” (Hoy et al., 2006, p. 239). Becoming more mindful will promote more trust within the organization, allow for open discussions and reporting of error as learning, and a rich awareness that differentiates supports for principals and provides an appreciation of their capabilities (Langer, 1984). Weick et al. (1999) when discussing mindfulness posits, it is “more about inquiry and interpretation grounded in capabilities for action” (p. 88). Given the demands of the job and the amount of time that
principals spend at work, it should be of no surprise to those in central office that these pressures are compromising the wellness of those in the principal corp. Increasing situational awareness will allow for school organizations to identify what is truly most important in leading in an age of accountability that yields a healthier organization.

Both of the principals studied in this research are scholars, mission driven, lead schools where our most vulnerable children attend, and lead in order to create a more just, humane society. They are humble, believe in truth, and fight against all odds for our most marginalized students. There is no doubt that working in CPS is exhausting and debilitating where justice and doing what is “right” appears to continually be compromised. I strongly encourage future researchers to investigate the well-being of urban districts nationally hoping that this potential trend can be eliminated.

Substantive Significance

Increased mindfulness is beneficial in many ways. Helping leaders employ more mindful practices allows for them and their staff to think differently about successes and simplification. Paying attention to failures rather than successes and identifying who within the organization has the expertise to handle problems are critical for not only improving reliability but the achievement of an important educational outcome for students: learning. Educators are learning too. Mindfulness, Weick and Sutcliffe (2006) argue, is concerned with learning within organizations as “dependent on qualities of mind and the way those qualities interrelate” (p. 515). The construct of mindfulness constitutes cognition and perception which additionally have an impact on students who benefit from the mindful practices of principals and teachers. This focus has the capacity for a call to action working in urban high schools.
The substantive significance also allows for schools to examine failure in order to improve the culture of the organization (preoccupation with failure), strengthening resilience as educators looks for unexpected outcomes (commitment to resilience), and easier transfer of decision making to experts and deference to those people who have information to share. Principals applying the characteristics of HROs are conforming their practice to key aspects of distributed leadership that will improve teacher job enrichment and satisfaction.

Limitations

Visits to both high schools occurred over the course of one year allowing me to observe principals in various settings. This allowed for me to triangulate the data through one-on-one visits, regional meetings, formalized interviews, district leadership team meetings, and observations of staff meetings. This increased my confidence in the trustworthiness of this action research study as an example of both high school principals demonstrating resilient practices and participating in deep reflective conversations.

Focusing on two high school principals may yield different results than concentrating on administrators at another level within the organization. This intentionally focused on high school principals as their tenure nationally is far less than those at other levels in the organization. Administrators at other levels may offer differing perspectives or viewpoints regarding how they report error, how they detect problems, the significance of their problems or the amount of resiliency they employ in their daily lives as administrators. Thus, the conclusions of this study may not apply across all administrative levels within the organization. I encourage future researchers to look at elementary and middle levels within a school district.

An additional limitation of this study may be that I am their supervisor and thus may have been perceived as a formal authoritarian where their responses may be used in a retaliatory
manner. To reduce this as a potential concern, I chose two administrators with whom I have a developed rapport after working with both of them for two consecutive years where they have both received favorable evaluations as administrators. But yet this decision too carried implications of bias and potential weaknesses.

An additional limitation to this study is that both schools had high poverty demographics. It is worthy to note that this study may not be transferrable to other demographics or working in schools with more affluent families.

A further limitation is that both principals had doctoral degrees and had a willingness to partake in mindful activities. I consider this a unique subset of most principals and worthy of noting.

Lastly, one limitation worth mentioning is that this subset of principals was from an urban school district. It is unclear as to whether these findings would be applicable to school districts in rural or suburban areas. I would argue that this limitation would be applicable to all areas of education as the demands of the job are untenable and deserve reviewing in order to increase student outcomes.

Recommendation and Reflection

Exploring and identifying how reliability and resilience are evident in the daily lives of experienced high school principals has allowed me to understand the ongoing mandates that are continuously placed upon principals that lead to resilient practices. It is essential that central office supervisors understand these demands and engage in mindful practices to help support leaders in urban education, yet until these practices are employed, principals will have ongoing demands that have the potential of compromising their wellness and their ability to perform
optimally. Action research however, allows for new learning with potential change to occur for those “on the ground.”

Recommendations for future research may include principals of other levels in the organization, researching mindful practices in smaller urban districts, and identifying other central office administrators and how they contribute to the vitality of the organization by employing mindful practices.

Nationally, principals are faced with overwhelming expectations for positive, measureable student outcomes, yet we continually place mandates that take significant time away from their jobs as instructional leaders (Bellamy et al., 2005). The age of accountability, now moving to national standards, a new teacher evaluation tool, and a new principal evaluation tool that encompasses 8 criteria for proficiency, has created environments that are forever challenging, flawed, and unsustainable. Principals cannot succeed in these environments and stay healthy as leaders for the greater organization.

Engaging in action research has allowed me to participate in studying the resiliency, rewards, and demands of two high school principals. Despite choosing high school principals who are demonstrated mindfulness, this action research has developed my own ability to engage in mindfulness at a different level of understanding. The tenure of high school principals is decreasing. My capacity to effectively support these two principals increased, their wellness improved, and my understanding of the importance of placing people first versus district mandates will alleviate the stressors principals are experiencing, hopefully keeping them as leaders in an organization.

As I reflect on my research I have developed a keen awareness of the importance of healthy institutions that share concrete, core values used as a lens for which we make decisions.
What we state as “mission work” in an urban district, is nothing more than rhetoric at best. For true change to happen, urban districts must develop trust within the organization that promotes risk taking without fear of being penalized. This will require organizations to explicitly articulate core values that are lived by every member of the organization. The challenge with larger urban districts is that too often decisions are made at the top and never migrate down toward those on the ground. This lack of flexibility and responsibility creates a disingenuous atmosphere that disregards the expertise of those running the schoolhouse. “The significance of both trust and mindfulness in schools is indisputable. They are inextricably related, and both create a climate for success” (Hoy, et al., 2006, p. 252). Being mindful of leaders “on the ground” will allow for principals to help support central office versus constantly battling never ending mandates.

Strikingly, the principals I work with have never wavered from their commitment to me or urban education. I have seen them grow cynical, understanding the central office dynamics have contributed largely to a dysfunctional culture. Both principals share core convictions, believe in mission driven work, and lead with an ethic of care. The ethic of care establishes a relational view where schools are held accountable for their results and they are committed to responsiveness within the organization as they believe all people should be held accountable within our democratic ideals that captures a solution to potential problems (Noddings; 2005). As depicted at PHS “Teachers and students should stay together by mutual consent, and no student should be forced to stay with a teacher he or she hates or fears” (Noddings; 2005, xvii). When both buildings lack the autonomy to make decisions, the central office becomes more autocratic reflecting decision making that is not necessarily best for the schoolhouse. At times this may be a result of a division of power. I have to believe that this is not intentional, but merely the reality when larger districts lose touch with those in the trenches. We live in a “tyranny of opposing
purposes” which lack the critical thinking, ethic of care, and democratic character which enables schools to offer differing opportunities and choice.

Moving forward I encourage urban districts to find ways to include leaders as they seek to build an acute awareness as to the challenges those face in the buildings. This may require superintendents to directly speak with principals and remove the barriers between central office personnel and building principals. To build trust within any organization will require top leadership to talk, reflect, and have in depth discussions directly with those executing the plan. Through this action research I have learned that executive directors working directly with school principals play an authentic role in developing principals as healthy leaders by providing them the supports they need, buffering district noise that removes them from the mission for which they are so passionate, and reflecting collectively on mindful practices that allow for deep discussion to move systems forward. One key is for central office to remove those mandates that require principals to simply manufacture information, versus having authentic conversations regarding what is truly important.

As 21st century leaders in urban education, principals are expected to increase student outcomes in order to close the achievement gap and be instructional leaders with a sense of urgency. There are two different kinds of urgency for principals: Immediate urgency due to safety concerns and an understanding of mandates that are urgent, but don’t always manage themselves in support of the principal’s work. An increase in mindfulness from central office will contribute to a deeper understanding of how principals navigate urban education in order to think differently about authority, plans, and simplification. For principals to do this well will require systemic change in how central office provides support for principals. It will also require the voice of principals to be considered more prior to decision making that impacts them directly.
It will require the central office to employ characteristics of HROs to yield more mindful practices that potentially increase student outcomes.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we must look at how comprehensive high schools are removing students from their database and for what reasons. Fred’s stories of students being “pushed out” of comprehensive high schools indicating their “data” will be scrutinized as a result of students “not graduating on time” is problematic and unethical. Listening to students regarding story after story on the lack of support they received, the bullying, the inability to celebrate self, and the challenges with their identity, should cause central office and school leaders to pause and ask different questions. Questions that allow for deep reflection and discussion on why our comprehensive high schools are failing students are imperative as we increase accountability for school leaders. We are failing some of our most vulnerable in the system due to barriers that are beyond a student’s control. The attributes of HROs and mindfulness offers potential avenues for fail-safe schools that serve all students.
REFERENCES


Delpit, L. (2012), Multiplication is for White People: The New Press, New York, NY:


Appendix A

Preoccupation with Failure

How do the following statements describe your school? For each item, circle the number that best reflects your conclusion: 1= not at all, 2= to some extent, 3= a great deal.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>We actively look for failure of all sizes and try to understand them.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>When something unexpected occurs, we always try to figure out why our expectations were not met.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>We treat near misses as information about the health of our school and try to learn from them.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>We regard near misses as failures that reveal potential dangers rather than as successes that show our capability to avoid disaster.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>We often update our procedures after experiencing a near miss.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>If you make a mistake it is not held against you.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>People report significant mistakes even if others do not notice that a mistake is made.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Our administrators actively seek out bad news.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>People feel free to talk to administrators about problems.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>People are rewarded if they spot potential trouble spots.</td>
<td>1  2  3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B
Reflectance to Simplify

How do the following statements describe your school? For each item, circle the number that best reflects your conclusion: 1 = not at all, 2 = to some extent, 3 = a great deal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>People around here take nothing for granted.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Questioning is encouraged.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>We strive to challenge the status quo.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>People feel free to bring up problems and tough issues.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>People generally deepen their analyses to better grasp the nature of the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>problems that arise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>People are encouraged to express different views.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>People listen carefully, and it is rare that someone’s view goes unheard.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>People are not attacked when they report information that could</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interrupt operations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>When something unexpected happens, people spend more time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>analyzing than advocating for their view.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Skeptics are highly valued.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>People trust each other.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>People show considerable respect for one another.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Sensitivity to Operations

Indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>On a day-to-day basis, there is always someone who is paying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>attention to what is happening.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Should problems occur, someone with the authority to act is</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>always accessible to people on the front lines.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Our administrators readily pitch in whenever necessary.</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>People have discretion to resolve unexpected problems as they</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>arise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>During an average day, people interact often enough to build a</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clear picture of the current situation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>People are always looking for feedback about things that aren’t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>going right.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>People are familiar with operations beyond their own job.</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>We have access to a variety of resources whenever unexpected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>surprises crop up.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Administrators constantly monitor workloads and reduce them</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>when they become excessive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Commitment to Resilience

How do the following statements describe your school? For each item, circle the number that best reflects your conclusion: 1= not at all, 2= to some extent, 3= a great deal

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>Resources are continually devoted to training and retraining people to operate the technical system.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>People have more than enough training and experience for the kind of work they do.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>This organization is actively concerned with developing people’s skills and knowledge.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>This organization encourages challenging “stretch” assignments.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><strong>People around here are known for their ability to use their knowledge in novel ways.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><strong>There is a concern with building people’s competence and response repertoires.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td><strong>People have a number of informal contacts that they sometimes use to solve problems.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td><strong>People learn from their mistakes.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td><strong>People rely on one another.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td><strong>Most people have the skills to act on the unexpected problems that arise.</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Deference to Expertise

How do the following statements describe your school? For each item, circle the number that best reflects your conclusion: 1= not at all, 2= to some extent, 3= a great deal

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. People are committed to doing their work well.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. People respect the nature of one another’s professional practice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If something out of the ordinary happens, people know who has the expertise to respond.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. People in this school value expertise and experience over seniority.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In this school, the people most qualified to make decisions make them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. People typically “own” a problem until it is resolved.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. It is generally easy to obtain expert assistance when something comes up that we don’t know how to handle.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

High School Resiliency Initial Winter Contact Letter

Dear (name will be filled in automatically),

Here is the message with its link to the electronic audits that Nancy Coogan and I discussed with you at our last meeting. We want to thank you in advance for taking time from your busy day to provide your opinion on our school’s resiliency. As a member of _______ HS faculty, your views matter on how we operate and work together creating the best teaching and learning environment. The individual responses from audit will be aggregated to identify areas where we as a school are doing well and those with opportunity for growth. There are five audits that will each take about 2 minutes to complete.

You can click on the link below or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser. All information you provide will be treated confidentially. Your name will not be matched with your responses. The data manager is using a unique identification number for data management purposes. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question or discontinue participation at any point. There is no personal risk to you. Should you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact me or Ms. Coogan. This project was qualified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Washington State University (WSU).

Sincerely,
Appendix G

High School Resiliency Second Letters

Dear (name will be filled in automatically),

I just want to thank those of you who have responded to the audits. Please, if you haven’t done so, click on the link below. We need your opinion for valid results. It only takes about 10 minutes to answer the questions. I know each of you care about our school and the work that we do here on behalf of our students. Resiliency is about our ability to handle the challenges that we face in achieving our mission. Research on organizations that navigate the hazards of the unexpected and haze of what’s uncertain shows them to exhibit the qualities of resilience as measured by these audits. Your views matter on how we are performing.

You can click on the link below or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser. All information you provide will be treated confidentially. Your name will not be matched with your responses. The data manager is using a unique identification number for data management purposes. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question or discontinue participation at any point. There is no personal risk to you. Should you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact me or Ms. Coogan. This project was qualified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Washington State University (WSU).

Sincerely,
Appendix H

High School Resiliency Third Letters

Dear (name will be filled in automatically),

Access to the audits will be closed at the end of the week. I just wanted to give you one more chance to share your opinion on how we are doing as a school. I know you’ve been busy and that you care about the quality of our work environment. These audits will help us identify areas of strength and weakness in terms of our ability to navigate unexpected events and respond appropriately given uncertainty.

You can click on the link below or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser. All information you provide will be treated confidentially. Your name will not be matched with your responses. The data manager is using a unique identification number for data management purposes. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question or discontinue participation at any point. There is no personal risk to you. Should you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact me or Ms. Coogan. This project was qualified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Washington State University (WSU).

Sincerely,
Appendix I

High School Resiliency Spring Initial Contact Letter

Dear (name will be filled in automatically),

Here is the message with its link to the electronic audits that Nancy Coogan and I discussed with you at our last meeting. As most of you will remember, we completed these audits in January as baseline. I’ve been working with Ms Coogan over the semester on a number of issues you identified and we’d like to assess how we are doing. We want to thank you in advance for taking time from your busy day to provide your opinion on our school’s resiliency. I wish to remind you that it doesn’t take much time to complete the audits.

You can click on the link below or copy and paste the link into your Internet browser. All information you provide will be treated confidentially. Your name will not be matched with your responses. The data manager is using a unique identification number for data management purposes. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question or discontinue participation at any point. There is no personal risk to you. Should you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact me or Ms. Coogan. This project was qualified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Washington State University (WSU).

Sincerely,
Appendix J

Background information: (First Interview)

1. Tell me about yourself and how you came to the decision to become a high school principal?
2. What words best describe your school? Your staff? Your students?
3. What are your challenges when describing your position?
4. Describe the culture of your school.
5. How do you go about delegating?
6. How does conflict play a role in your job?
7. When do you take action as a school leader?
8. How do you distribute leadership?
9. Describe how you build trust within your school organization.

Mindfulness: (Second Interview)

10. Tell me about your communication style.
11. How do you handle conflict with your staff?
12. When does your staff practice automaticity?
13. What do you notice about the habits of your staff?
14. Under what circumstances does your staff resist change?
15. Under what conditions in your school does change occur?
16. How do you make decisions?
17. Who do you go to for advice when you don’t know how to do something?
18. How do you create organizational routines? How do you maintain these routines?
19. How do you buffer district mandates from your staff?
20. How do you balance mindfulness with the sense of urgency?
21. Explain to what extent do you believe that educators engage in mindlessness behaviors.

Resiliency: (Third Interview)

22. Explain the most challenging decision you have made as a principal that did not “sit well” with you. How do you overcome that feeling when you question your own decision?
23. How do you respond when you know “trouble” is coming? How do you prepare your staff for this “trouble?”
24. What pressures are you feeling as an administrator and how do you deal with those pressures?
25. Tell me about how you deal with the demands of the job?
26. How do you build resiliency as a principal?
27. How does your staff react to pressure or intensity?
28. Do you worry about mistakes that you make with the staff? How do you engage in conversation with staff when you make mistakes?
29. How do you motivate people who become complacent?
30. How do you create a culture where staff is comfortable reporting errors?
31. How do you use reflection?
32. Explain your thinking about how you plan for staff development opportunities? Who is involved in the process?

Follow Up: (Fourth Interview)
1. How do you feel your experiences have contributed to your success as a principal?
2. Is there something you would like to share regarding being a principal or doing the work of a principal?
3. Moving forward, what do you hope to learn from your experiences?
4. What surprised you about the results of the post assessment?
5. Is there anything that alarmed you about the post assessment?
6. Is there an area that you would like to be more mindful going forward and how do you anticipate building a mindful infrastructure as a school leader?
Appendix K
Observation Protocol

1. Description of the school (physical environment). The staff. The students
2. Student behavior in halls, at lunch, in classes
3. Staff members communication with students
4. Staff members communication with administration
5. Relationship with school and community
6. Delegation of job responsibilities
7. What is prioritized? What do administrators relinquish control of?