SCHOOL PRINCIPALS’ REASSIGNMENT UNDER RACE TO THE TOP LEGISLATION:
WASHINGTON STATE PRINCIPALS’ SENSE MAKING
AND AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCES

By
CAROLE MEYER

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of CAROLE MEYER find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

____________________________
Gail Furman, Ph.D., Chair

____________________________
Joan Kingrey, Ph.D.

____________________________
Michele Acker-Hocevar, Ph.D.
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In January of 2010, the draconian nature of Race to the Top legislation launched me into a demoralizing and devastating career experience that I was totally unprepared for, as I became one of 41 reassigned principals in Washington State. I enrolled in the superintendent program at Washington State University, where I met one of the other reassigned principals in the state, and for the first time in months I did not feel isolated and alone. Dr. Joan Kingrey became my supervisor for the superintendent program, and my course of study for this doctorate became a reality through her encouragement. After completing the superintendent cohort in 2012, I was assigned temporarily to Dr. Gail Furman as my chair, who later became my permanent chair. Dr. Michele Acker-Hocevar became my third committee member. I have referred to these three dynamic women as the “powerful trio,” and I am indebted to them for their willingness to support me in this academically rigorous experience. Gail and Joan have spent hours with me, and I am forever indebted for their patience, guidance, and encouragement. Dr. Kristin Huggins pointed me in the direction of the Rice and Malen (2003) research on human costs. And, at Gail’s encouragement (and because she knows Betty Malen), I contacted Dr. Malen, who graciously spent time with me over the phone and sent me some of her recent research. This was one of the highlights of my research process.

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The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore how K-12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of the experience of being reassigned under the provisions of Washington State’s version of RTTT. The research questions this study attempted to answer were: (a) How do principals describe what happened when they were reassigned? (b) How did principals work with staff, students, district, and community around the issue of being reassigned? (c) How did reassignment impact principals emotionally, personally, and professionally? (d) What are principals’ evaluations of this type of policy approach? And (e) What were the human costs/benefits associated with reassignment? Conceptual frames related to human costs (Rice & Malen, 2003), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2005, & 2007), and Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) were used to guide the study. Extensive in-depth interviews were conducted with six selected principal participants to explore their experiences of reassignment. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis were (a) costs of reassignment associated with RTTT policy implementation, (b) principal critique of this type of
policy approach, and (c) the sensemaking journey of each principal impacted by reassignment. This study found that reassignment had substantial impacts on principals, their critiques of the policy included: (a) unintended consequences; (b) the number of years required to successfully turn around a low-performing school; (c) lack of alignment with good practice in schools; (d) SIG grants’ failure to demonstrate notable benefits to students; (e) the mistake of funding education through competitive means; and (f) the importance of political action and principal “voice” in shaping education policy. However, over time, the participants were able to resume a sense of normalcy in their work. The following four major conclusions from this study can be stated: (a) RTTT is a draconian approach to education reform and its costs outweigh the benefits; (b) RTTT policy’s restrictive requirements were seen as unfair and left little choice for districts; (c) principal “voice” is a critical component in education reform; and (d) conceptual frames of Rice and Malen (2003), Weick (1995, 2005, & 2007), and the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969) describe participant’s experiences.
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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the 41 principals in Washington State who were reassigned as a result of Race to the Top legislation in 2010. My sincere appreciation especially to the six reassigned principal participants in this research who were willing to openly and candidly reveal their traumatic experiences of reassignment in order to hopefully draw attention to the cruel realities of the implementation of personnel-targeted education policy and the negative outcomes this type of legislation creates. I can only hope that I have adequately represented their collective and individual “voices” in the telling of their stories. For me personally, this study has been cathartic, therapeutic, and validating.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

This qualitative interview study explored how K-12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of their reassignment under the provisions of Washington State’s (2009a) version of the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation. Rice and Malen (2003), Ravitch (2013), and Berliner and Glass (2014), among others, label RTTT as a “personnel-targeted” accountability policy in that the law’s four school “turnaround” models require the removal or reassignment of principals. Specifically, sanctions for schools performing in the persistently lowest 5% in each state were to include the removal or reassignment of principals when they had served in their schools for 3 or more years. Additionally, in one “turnaround” model, sanctions included the removal or reassignment of the teaching staff. In Washington State’s version of RTTT, requirements are embodied in ESS2B-SB 6696, passed in 2010, which made the state eligible to apply for federal School Improvement Grants (SIG). Because of this law, in 2010, 41 principals in the state public schools were released from their building leadership role and reassigned to other positions in their districts. I was one of these principals. My motivation to conduct this study grew out of this experience.

I had been the principal of Rogers High School in Spokane for 5 years. Rogers is situated in the highest poverty zip code in the state and was identified in the lowest 5% because of insufficient on-time graduation rates, yet had been making significant progress in creating a college- and career-going culture by adding multiple advanced placement and honors courses as well as increasing the number of students taking college entrance exams. However, the mobility of the student population in high poverty situations and inaccurate tracking mechanisms, led to a
dip in on-time graduation rates at Rogers. The situation at Rogers was typical, in that poverty and high mobility rates were a common denominator in the schools identified across the state as in the lowest performing 5%. As with other principals who were reassigned, I tried to make sense of the reassignment experience, and was motivated to both learn from other reassigned principals as well as to give “voice” to their experiences.

The conceptual frameworks for this study were drawn from Weick’s (1995, 2005) concept of sensemaking and from Rice and Malen’s (2003) human costs analysis. Rice and Malen (2003) developed the human costs theoretical framework as a result of their study on the reconstitution of schools. Rice and Malen’s framework includes three interrelated dimensions of human costs: “(a) task costs, (b) social costs, and (c) psychological costs” (p. 637). A crucial property of sensemaking is that human situations are progressively clarified (Weick, 1995, p. 11). Many times clarification occurs after outcomes are experienced; thus “sensemaking” is often retrospective on the part of the individual (Weick, 2006). This study examines the three interrelated human costs and their impact experienced by principals; how principals navigated reassignment with their staffs, students, district and communities; and how principals made sense of their experience over time.

Chapter One continues with the background overview of United States Department of Education (DOE) and Washington State education policy legislation related to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), RTTT, Senate Bill (SB) 6696, and the four RTTT “turnaround” models. After explaining current policy, I present an overview of the research problem and purpose statements, research questions, methods, and my positionality as researcher. The final section of the chapter reviews the role of principal “voice” in the development of federal and state education policy.
Background

Education policy in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has increasingly emphasized accountability. Since the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), federal legislation has established what political scientist Patrick McGuinn (2006) refers to as the “accountability regime” (p. 196). Typical components of accountability legislation are high-stakes testing, competitive state and federal grants for low-performing schools, and the threat of sanctions for schools that fail to meet prescribed adequate yearly progress (AYP) (Houle, 2006; Meyers & Murphy, 2007; Orr, Berg, Shore, & Meier, 2008; Rice & Malen, 2003). Orfield, Kim, Sunderman, and Greer (2004) add that accountability legislation typically includes formal structures “of testing, threat of sanctions, and loss of both fiscal and human resources as the strongest incentives to produce improvement” (Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011, p. 172). Consequently, turning around identified failing schools has become “paramount for educators, policy actors, and community members” (Meyers & Murphy, 2007, p. 631).

Federal Legislation

The ANAR report led to the “accountability regime” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 196) and subsequently to federal legislation beginning with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which passed in 2001, and then Race to the Top (RTTT), which passed in 2010. Common in both policies were specific consequences or sanctions for schools not meeting adequate yearly progress. As reflected in these federal policies, the use of sanctions as policy levers is unparalleled in American history (Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011).
According to Mintrop and Trujillo (2005, 2007), legislators tend to use such sanction-heavy policy levers to improve schools’ performance, even though little empirical support suggests that such sanctions are effective. Critics of these policies, however, point out that complex social problems are the source of low levels of student achievement.

RTTT required that schools identified on the lowest-performing 5% list in each state select one of four turnaround models. Under these turnaround models, reassignment or removal of the principal was required if the principal had served in the building for 3 or more years, without the opportunity for the school, district, or state to discuss the benefits or costs of these decisions (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Ramatullah, & Tallant, 2010). The four turnaround models allowed under RTTT are:

- **Turnarounds.** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the school’s staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job-embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career-advancement incentives; implement a research-based, aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility.

- **Restarts.** (Charter School) Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.

- **Transformations.** Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide job-embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher-evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career advancement incentives;
implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning- and teacher-planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.

- **School Closures.** Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools. (Kutash et al., 2010a, pp. 2-3)

**Washington State**

Race to the Top (RTTT) led to Washington State Senate Bill (SB) 6696, which made the state eligible for competitive federal SIG according to RTTT policy. Under RTTT and SIG requirements, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) approved Washington State’s “definition of persistently low-achieving schools” (Middling & Harding, 2010, p. 5). Washington State’s definition used the “system for categorizing persistently low-achieving schools” on the list (Middling & Harding, 2010, pp. 7-8). The categories of Tier I and Tier II were designated as Achievement, Newly Eligible, and/or Graduation (Newman, 2010). Definitions of the categories were consistent with federal language from RTTT (Middling & Harding, 2010):

- **Tier I-Achievement** schools included any Title I school in improvement, corrective action or restructuring that was also among the lowest-achieving 5% in the “all students” group in reading and mathematics for the past three consecutive years.

- **Tier I-Graduation** schools included any high schools that had a weighted-average graduation rate that was less than 60% based on the past three years of data.

- **Tier I-Newly Eligible** schools included any school that had not made AYP for at least the past two years; and was no higher-achieving than the highest-achieving school identified in either Tier I Achievement or Graduation categories.
• **Tier II-Achievement** schools included the lowest-achieving 5% of secondary schools in the "all students" group in reading and mathematics combined for the past three consecutive years.

• **Tier II-Graduation** schools included high schools that had a weighted-average graduation rate that was less than 60% based on the past three years of data.

• **Tier II- Newly Eligible** schools included Title I eligible secondary schools that: had not made AYP for at least the past two consecutive years; were no higher-achieving than the highest-achieving school identified in either Tier I Achievement or Graduation categories; and were in Step 5 of Improvement with a decreasing performance trend. (pp. 7-8)

Under RTTT, Tier I and Tier II schools required interventions including removal or reassignment of the principal if the principal had served in the school for 3 or more years. Under SIG guidelines the Tier I and II schools became “Models of Equity and Excellence through Rapid Improvement and Turnaround (MERIT) or Required Action Districts (RAD)” (Middling & Harding, 2010, p. 21). SIG/MERIT schools and RAD districts were required to meet the following evaluation requirements for teachers and leaders (Middling & Harding, 2010):

• Implement rigorous, transparent and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals which are developed with staff; and use student growth as a significant factor.

• Identify and reward school leaders and teachers who have increased student achievement and graduation rates.
• Identify and remove those who, after ample opportunities to improve professional practice, have not done so.

• Implement such strategies as financial incentives and career ladders for recruiting, placing and retaining effective teachers. (p. 22)

Federal regulations required Washington State’s Office of Public Instruction (OSPI) to oversee performance audits and to approve and review RAD plans (Newman, 2010). Districts were then eligible to submit proposals for SIG grants. RTTT required that states focus on four assurance areas, and proposals were scored on each applicant’s response to criteria in the “four assurance areas: standards and assessments, data systems to support instruction, great teachers and leaders, and turning around struggling schools” (The State of Washington, Washington State Board of Education, and Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2009b, p. 3). Of the four turnaround models allowed under RTTT, turnarounds, transformations, and school closures were the options allowed under Washington law. The fourth model, restarts, was not a choice in Washington, as charter schools at that time had not been approved by Washington voters.

In March 2010, the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) published on its website the first list of persistently low-achieving schools (Newman, 2010). There were 47 schools in 27 districts identified as Tier I or Tier II. Forty-four were traditional public schools and three were alternative schools (Middling & Harding, 2010). With seven schools identified on the list, Pasco Public Schools was the most impacted and had the highest number of schools (Newman, 2010). Seattle Public Schools and Mount Adams School district had three schools each on the list, and the remaining districts had one or two schools on the list (Newman, 2010). The identified SIG schools had significantly higher concentrations
than the state averages in the following categories: ethnic diversity, poverty, and English Language Learners (Middling & Harding, 2010).

Competitive SIG grants were available to each school district through a rigorous application process that had a school on the lowest performing 5% list. To be eligible to apply for SIG grants under RTTT, the identified Tier I or Tier II schools needed to adopt one of the three turnaround models under Washington legislation and the Washington State Board of Education (SBE) and OSPI (Middling & Harding, 2010). Twenty-seven districts were eligible to apply on behalf of 47 schools. Twenty-one of the 27 eligible districts chose to apply for SIG grants and adopt a turnaround model. Six districts did not participate in the SIG grant process. Within the 21 districts making application for SIG grants, 37 schools applied using the transformation model, three schools applied using the turnaround model, and one school applied using school closure. Seventeen schools were awarded SIG grants in the first round of proposals on behalf of nine districts (Middling & Harding, 2010). The 24 remaining schools made application for grants but did not receive them in the first round and therefore were eligible to reapply the following year. Due to the schools’ efforts to be eligible and in compliance with RTTT policy, these grant applications resulted in the reassignment of 41 school principals.

Accountability Policy

RTTT federal education policy is part of an education “family” of policies that emphasize accountability. Ravitch (2011) cautions that RTTT accountability “promotes policies that have no basis in research or in practice” (p. 11). Ravitch also notes that implementing competitive funding structures “will gut the promise of fairness and equity, the very rationale for federal aid education, which will result in winners and losers” (p. 10). Although there are arguments to be
made for accountability measures in education, according to Sykes, Schneider, and Plank (2009), the “theory regarding how incentives and capacity interact to affect organizational performance in general and school performance in particular is underdeveloped” (p. 465). There is some evidence to indicate educators have experienced costs in connection with education reform (Rice & Malen, 2003). Rice and Malen (2003) found that “although the stated aim of reconstitution is to enhance the human capital” available in low-performing schools, that “aim may not be realized” (p. 635). “Instead,” Rice and Malen note, “reconstitution reform may impose substantial human costs, which undermine its ability to achieve its primary aim” (p. 635). Little research has been conducted on the implementation of RTTT (2009) policy, as the first SIG grants will conclude in 2014. To date, research specific to the impacts of RTTT and how it is being implemented in states like Washington is lacking.

**Problem Statement**

Race to the Top (RTTT) can be categorized as a “personnel-targeted” accountability policy (Rice & Malen, 2003) in that all four “turnaround” models allowed under the law require the removal or reassignment of principals. RTTT is being implemented in states including Washington, where three of the turnaround models were allowed, all of which are personnel-targeted. Advocates for accountability policies such as NCLB and RTTT have focused on closing the achievement gap for underrepresented groups of students through policy mandates (Scheurich & Skrla, 2004). However, critics point out numerous issues with sanction-oriented policies (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Ravitch, 2013). Rice and Malen (2003) include potential human costs for impacted educators who are reassigned or removed in the process of reconstituting schools. Significant in Rice and Malen’s findings were three
interrelated costs associated with tasks and with social and psychological elements. Very little research has been conducted on the impact of sanction-heavy policies on the individuals who are reassigned. In particular, research has not focused on the voice of the reassigned principals. If the impacts and costs of sanction-heavy education policies are to be fully understood, it is evident that more research is needed in regard to the lived experiences, human costs (Rice & Malen, 2003), and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) of reassigned principals as a result of the implementation of RTTT legislation.

**Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore how K-12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of the experience of their reassignment under the provisions of Washington State’s version of the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation (2009). The study will privilege the “voices” of these principals as they narrate their lived experiences of being reassigned by their school districts. Weick’s (1995, 2005) concept of sensemaking and Rice and Malen’s (2003) human costs framework will be used to guide the study and analyze the qualitative interview data.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that this study attempted to answer were: (a) How do principals describe what happened when they were reassigned? (b) How did principals work with staff, students, district, and community around the issue of being reassigned? (c) How did reassignment impact principals emotionally, personally, and professionally? (d) What are principals’ evaluations of this type of policy approach? and (e) What were the human costs/benefits associated with reassignment?
**Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical frames inform the design of this study and the analysis of data. The sensemaking concept, drawn primarily from Weick’s (1995, 2005) work, informs the problem and purpose of the study; to explore how principals “made sense” of their reassignment in retrospection. In addition, sensemaking guides the study’s methodology of the phenomenon of being reassigned as experienced by a group of principals. Qualitative, phenomenologically oriented interviews will be used to explore participants’ narratives regarding how they made sense of their experiences. The second theoretical frame, drawn from Rice and Malen’s (2003) analysis of the “human costs” associated with accountability reforms, will serve as a sensitizing concept for data analysis. These frames are briefly reviewed here and will be discussed in greater depth in the literature review.

**Sensemaking**

*Sensemaking*, according to Weick (1995), “is the process by which people give meaning to experience” (p. 4). Sensemaking is the ability to take complex situations and put them into words and perceptions that help people articulate and understand these situations. It is a telling and retelling of stories to ourselves - constructing and reconstructing stories and “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Starbuck and Milliken (1988) describe sensemaking as the ability to “comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict . . . and to place stimuli into some kind of framework” (p. 51). Weick (1995) adds that “a crucial property of sensemaking is that human situations are progressively clarified” (p. 11). Often clarification occurs after outcomes are experienced; thus “sensemaking” is often retrospective on the part of the individual (Weick, 2006).
Weick (2001) likens sensemaking to maps; maps provide people in unfamiliar situations with a course of action, and anxiety is thereby reduced. A good story is like a workable map and can show “patterns that may already exist in the puzzles an actor now faces, or patterns that could be created anew in the interest of making more order and sense in the future” (Weick, 1995, p. 61). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking has “seven distinguishing characteristics that set” it apart from other ways of explaining “processes such as understanding, interpretation, and attribution” (p. 17). These seven distinguishing characteristics are identity construction, retrospection, enactment, socialization, continuation-ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. These will be explained more fully in the literature review.

**Human Costs**

A decade ago, Rice and Malen (2003) studied reconstituting schools and the human costs associated with reconstitution. Rice and Malen noted that “although school reconstitution can take a variety of forms,” reconstitution strategies usually involve “removing a school’s” current administrators and teachers (p. 635). In regard to the human costs related to reconstitution, the researchers state:

> Although the stated aim of reconstitution is to enhance the human capital available in low-performing schools, that aim may not be realized. Instead, reconstitution reform may impose substantial human costs, which undermine the ability of this reform to achieve its primary aim. (pp. 636-637)

Rice and Malen (2003) developed the human costs theoretical framework as a result of their study. Their framework includes “three interrelated dimensions of human costs: (a) task costs, (b) social costs, and (c) psychological costs” (p. 637). Task costs were described as, quite
literally, the extra tasks required to go through reconstitution. According to Malen, Croninger, Muncey, and Redmond-Jones (2002), the loss of reputably experienced teachers and administrators and the influx of inexperienced ones results in a social cost, both to students and to employees. Finally, there are psychological costs to individuals. These psychological costs can include long-term collateral damage to individuals and to school communities as a result of reconstitution (Jones & Malen, 2002).

Methods

This qualitative interview study was designed to explore how principals “made sense” of the experience of reassignment related to the requirements of RTTT legislation in Washington State. A phenomenological approach to interviewing was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to listen to the voices of the participants as they narrated their personal and professional experiences and how they made sense of them. Seidman’s (2006) approach to phenomenologically oriented interviewing guided this study. Seidman uses a method that “combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (p. 15). In addition, Kvale’s (1996) seven stages of interviewing were used as a resource in the design of this study and will be explained in depth in Chapter Three. The approach uses “open-ended questions and the major task is to build upon and explore participants’ responses to those questions” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). The goal, therefore, is to have participants reconstruct an experience. Participants in this study participated in a two-step interview process with an initial interview and a follow-up interview in an effort to provide in-depth data in regard to their experiences.
To select participants for the study, I used the list of Washington State’s persistently low-achieving schools as published on the OSPI website on March 15, 2010 (Newman, 2010). There were 47 schools in 27 districts identified as Tier I or Tier II (Newman, 2010). Of these 27 districts, six districts did not participate in the SIG grant process, 37 schools applied using the transformation model, three schools applied using the turnaround model, and one school applied using school closure (The State of Washington, Washington State Board of Education, and Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2009). Of the 21 districts that did apply for SIG grants, a purposeful sampling of the 41 school principals who were reassigned was conducted, specifically sampling secondary school principals with a goal of finding five to six total interviewees. Snowball, chain, or network sampling best describes the approach to purposeful sampling used in this study, as the strategy of locating a few key participants from the group led to addition of more participants from the group (Merriam, 2009). Three principals who were interviewed in a pilot study conducted in the fall of 2012 were re-interviewed. The strength and merit of conducting a qualitative interview study lay in gaining firsthand accounts from the principals who were reassigned, including how they made sense of their reassignment and the human costs they incurred.

Data collected included the in-depth interviews with participants as well as other artifacts from the 5% lowest performing schools in Washington State in 2010. Extensive in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected principal participants to ascertain the human costs and sensemaking of their lived experience of their reassignment under RTTT implementation. (See interview protocol in Appendix A.) Follow up interviews were conducted with each of the six participants and were individualized based on their first interviews.
Ethical considerations were paramount because the potential to re-traumatize the interviewees or stir uncomfortable emotions regarding the experience was strong. Confidentiality was important because the group was small enough for possible identification. In all cases, participants were vulnerable in sharing their personal thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and emotions regarding their experience of reassignment. Transparency regarding my own experience was critical in developing a connection to all participants to increase their comfort level in sharing their own stories. Careful consideration was given to the potential benefits to participants in allowing them to narrate and give voice to their experiences.

**Personal and Professional Standpoint**

My personal and professional standpoint as the author of this study is that in January of 2010, I was one of the principals identified on the list of lowest-performing 5% of schools in the state. My perspectives are shaped by my own experiences and sensemaking as a principal and the human costs I experienced as part of being reassigned. My aspiration as an administrator was to lead a comprehensive high school in Spokane, and I was the third female to do so in Spokane Public Schools, serving as a principal at Rogers High School for 5 years. Reassignment was the first career change I had not initiated. I was at the National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) convention in Phoenix, Arizona in 2010, representing the state organization of Washington Association for Secondary School Principals (WASSP) as the vice president. While at the convention, I received a call from my immediate supervisor saying that Rogers High School was identified on the list of lowest-performing 5% of schools in the state. At the same time, other principals standing outside appeared to be on similar phone calls, receiving similar devastating news. Disbelief and denial were my first stages of grief and loss,
for the principal position that I had aspired to was disappearing without recourse—I knew that under state policy, I would be reassigned. Over the previous 5 years, Rogers’s staff and students had made significant gains in creating a college- and career-preparation culture while also undergoing an entire rebuild of the physical facility. Advance placement courses and exams had multiplied considerably, and the perception of the greater Spokane community regarding the student body had been markedly enhanced. For me as the school leader, this work had been personally and professionally challenging as well as gratifying, with significant improvements made for the school, students, staff and community. As a child of poverty, I felt I was uniquely equipped to address some of the myths and realities at Rogers, which is situated in the highest concentration of poverty in the state. The remaining stages of grief and loss—anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance—were all stages I faced as part of my experience (Kübler-Ross Grief Construct, 1969).

Although subsequent conversations with the superintendent suggested that I was a “victim” of the RTTT policy and that the district had no choice in regard to the reassignment, the district did not make any announcement about the reasons for my reassignment; therefore, others were left to make up their own interpretation about what had happened. Rumors that I was demoted to a middle school surfaced. I considered my reassignment a derailment of my career trajectory that undermined my self-confidence and left me feeling like an imposter in my administrative role, despite extensive evidence of my competence.

In the course of my professional career, I experienced success and continued advancement from teacher to counselor and then administrator. At the time of my reassignment I had been an administrator for 10 years and have continued to be a successful middle school
principal in the 4 years following my reassignment. My personal process of reassignment was an experience of costs, and I relate closely with the human costs analysis, which includes task, social, and psychological costs (Rice & Malen, 2003).

An example of a task cost for me was being tasked with telling the staff that I would be reassigned in order for the school and district to be eligible for a SIG grant. This announcement was made during a special staff meeting that I held, in which my reassignment was the only topic. I stood before the staff and tried to explain the policy requirements that placed me in a position to step aside in compliance with the policy so that the district could apply for a SIG grant, which the district eventually received. This was a very emotional experience, and I choked back tears as I shared that I would be the principal of Salk Middle School for the coming school year. I was also tasked with writing a letter of recommendation for my assistant principal, who became my replacement and a first year principal. In regard to a social cost, the reassignment was interpreted by others as a demotion to a middle school principalship, as occasionally people specifically referenced my reassignment this way, and the district leadership did not publically state otherwise. As a member of the district administrative team, my replacement was often given accolades for student achievement results from the years that I served as principal of the school. A psychological cost was that the reassignment was a personally and professionally painful process.

All of these experiences, which influenced my biases and beliefs, needed to be considered throughout the conducting of this study as possible influences on my interpretation of the data. It was also important, as I sought out participants for the study, to fully disclose the fact
that I was also a principal from the reassigned list. I believe one of the reasons participants were willing to talk with me was the fact that they knew I was “one of them.”

To further illustrate my personal and professional standpoint, I echo the sentiments of Diane Ravitch (2010). In her book, Ravitch criticizes several reform efforts from the 1990s and 2000s and the NCLB law, as well as the Gates Foundation and other philanthropists. Ravitch reviews the history of the American school system and the root cause of the decline that began in 1960s and goes on to review the current emphasis on testing and accountability. She cautions readers to be skeptical of the latest “panacea” (teacher effectiveness) as the solution. In her keynote address to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) national conference, Ravitch (2011) states:

If the Obama Blueprint—the administration’s plan to reauthorize ESEA—inserts the principle of competition, it will gut the promise of fairness and equity, the very rationale for federal aid education. Most children, particularly poor children, will be the losers, and this would be wrong. But there are even bigger problems with the Race to the Top than its competitive nature; it promotes policies that have no basis in research or in practice. (p. 10)

One major factor noted by Ravitch (2011) is that turnaround models require leaders to operate within a school system that already exists. The difficulty of changing beliefs and practices of adults within the constraints of unions, school boards, and central offices is that current practices prevent the radical changes possible in starting over with control over hiring, length of day, student recruitment, and more opportunities to prove that low-income students can achieve at the same or higher levels than their affluent peers.
To further clarify my personal standpoint, I also echo challenges policymakers create when passing reform legislation. RTTT is one such policy that requires mandates that are carried out at the local levels by building leaders. RTTT policy requires the removal of people and therefore is personnel-targeted legislation. My belief is that removing principals and teachers will not solve the challenges of student achievement; consequently, removing principals is a short-sighted answer to a much larger challenge.

**Report of the Study**

This report of the study consists of five chapters. Chapter One includes the introduction, research problem and purpose statements, research questions, an overview of methods, and the researcher’s positionality. Chapter Two consists of a review of the literature related to RTTT and the research problem. Chapter Three explains the methods used in the study in more detail. Chapter Four presents the data analysis. Chapter Five provides the summary and conclusions drawn from the study, its practical and theoretical significance, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore how K–12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of the experience of their reassignment under the provisions of Washington State’s (2009a) version of the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation. Weick’s (1995, 2005) concept of sense-making and Rice and Malen’s (2003) human costs framework were used to guide the study and analyze the qualitative interview data. This chapter includes a review of literature related to the history and politics behind the RTTT policy, analysis of RTTT as a policy instrument, a critique and examination of the unintended consequences of RTTT, an exploration of the role of principal “voice” in education policy, and delineation of the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

The History Behind Race to the Top Policy

Race to the Top (RTTT) is the latest manifestation of the accountability movement in federal education reform policy. Accountability in education is not a new phenomenon. The use of “high-stakes testing began in the late 19th century when business and professional leaders . . . wanted to centralize the administrative control of school districts” (Togut, 1999, p. 6). According to Togut (1999), this centralization process was especially intended for urban schools. However, the emphasis on accountability and the federal government’s role in the accountability movement has shifted dramatically over the years. Starting with the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), federal funds began to be designated to “improve academic achievement,” with the central focus on “promoting equity and access for disadvantaged
students” (U.S. Department of Education, 1965, p. 1). Following the passage of ESEA, a “minimum competency testing movement of the 1970s was the first in a series of reforms” (Togut, 1999, p. 6) in education in which “tests were used not just as measures of the effectiveness of reforms but also as the primary drivers of reform” (Shepard, 2014, p. 1).

Federal dollars associated with these reforms came with a mandate that schools must “be evaluated to show their effectiveness and legislators mandated tests of minimum academic skills or survival skills” (Shepard, 2014, p. 1) with the intention of raising the value of a high school diploma (Wollack & Fremer, 2013). The “Business Roundtable (BRT) initiated a campaign to return curriculum to the so-called basics (such as phonics)” and to “require schools to meet high standards and be held accountable” (Johnson, Johnson, Farenga, & Ness, 2008, p. 5). Some researchers insisted that these “reforms efforts should be guided by experts from the business world who understood the economy” (Johnson et al., 2008, p. 6). By 1980, 37 “states had taken action to mandate minimum competency standards for grade-to-grade promotion or high school graduation” (Ryan & Shepard, 2008, p. 31).

**A Nation at Risk Report**

Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, under the direction of President Reagan, created a commission of educators, government leaders, and citizens in 1981 “to examine the quality of education in the United States and to make” practical recommendations for improvements (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983a, p. 7). The commission was created to both strengthen high school curriculum and ensure that all students would be prepared for life, independent of whether they intended to attend college (Togut, 1999). The commission’s 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (ANAR), dramatically defined...
the issue of educational quality by exposing educational deficiencies as measured by high school performance of United States students compared to that of students from other countries (Fowler, 2009). Contained in the report were risk factors that were identified through documents and testimony (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983a). The findings were reported in the following categories: content, expectations, time, and teaching. The commission concluded that “declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983b, p. 17). As a result, the commission made recommendations for effective leadership in education.

The ANAR report “was a crucial focusing event as it fueled increasing public concern about the decline of public education and, in particular, its impact on the nation’s economic competitiveness” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 215). As McGuinn (2006) argued, both Democrats and Republicans seized the opportunity to use the report to argue for federal education policy changes; however, they took very different approaches. Democrats argued in favor of increased federal funding and control over schools. Republicans argued against federal influence in favor of greater “choice” in the form of vouchers. In addition, public outcry for equity for disadvantaged students increased given the ANAR findings. These influences led to an “unprecedented level of federal involvement” in education (McGuinn, 2006, p. 29).

**No Child Left Behind**

The ensuing passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 was possible due to the increased role of the federal government in education reform. The NCLB policy focused on a broad “goal of improving education for all students” using “increased accountability for school
performance” (McGuinn, 2006, p. 194). NCLB (2001) emphasized accountability, testing, rewards, adequate yearly progress (AYP), public school choice, and equity for minority and underrepresented students in the public education systems (DeBray, 2005). NCLB required states to set educational proficiency levels and to meet AYP, which is the measurement of how every school, district and state in the United States performs on standardized tests, with the requirement that 100% of all students be proficient by 2014 (NCLB, 2001). According to The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (n.d.), if schools failed to meet their AYP goals, they were subject to progressive consequences. The five progressive steps of AYP are described here:

1. After one year, schools failing to make annual yearly progress (AYP) are placed on a “school improvement” list.
2. Students attending schools that do not make AYP for two years in a row will be given the option to transfer to another school.
3. Schools on the list for 3 consecutive years must provide supplemental services for their students, such as tutoring or after school programs.
4. After four years on the list, schools must, in addition to the above, do at least one of the following: replace school staff, use new curriculum, decrease school management authority, appoint outside experts, extend school year/day, or restructure.
5. After 5 consecutive years, schools face restructuring, such as firing staff, privatization, charter school management, state takeover, or other comparable changes; districts face similar sanctions. (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d., p. 1)
The Department of Education (DOE) developed detailed NCLB regulations, threatening to withhold federal funds from states that did not comply with NCLB mandates. In 2012, Washington State was granted a waiver from NCLB regulations and school districts—in particular, the schools identified as being among the lowest-performing 5%—had more autonomy in decision making regarding principals. However, in 2014, Washington State was the first state to lose the NCLB waiver from the federal government and reverted back to the regulations of NCLB, meaning that if schools failed to meet their AYP goals, they were subject to the progressive consequences as listed above. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan pulled the waiver because the state did not tie teacher evaluations to student performance metrics in a timely fashion, which is a requirement for RTTT reform (Bidwell, 2014). In addition, the state legislature had an opportunity to pass a bill that would preserve the waiver but failed to do so.

**Race to the Top.** Race to the Top (RTTT) emerged as the next major federal education policy soon after President Obama took office in 2009. Arne Duncan, senior advisor for education to President Obama, led the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the authoring of RTTT. According to a 2009 White House press release, RTTT was designed to “spur systemic reform and embrace innovative approaches to teaching and learning in America’s schools” (The White House, 2009, p. 1). Advocates for RTTT challenged the “status quo” of education in favor of reform priorities included in the policy. The president’s remarks in the press release also called attention to weaknesses in the public school system. President Obama stated that he would use his veto power in defense of RTTT policy and in preventing states from “watering it down” (Klein, 2010, p. 1). High school dropout rates were among the nation’s public school failings. Referring to high school as a
“dropout factory” fueled additional media frenzy after President Obama used the phrase (Allen, 2010). The White House press release (2009) noted several reform priorities emphasized in Race to the Top:

(a) Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments.
(b) Attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America’s classrooms.
(c) Supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction.
(d) Using innovation and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools.
(e) Demonstrating and sustaining education reform. (pp. 1-2)

RTTT required that schools identified on the lowest-performing 5% list in each state select one of four turnaround models. Under these turnaround models, principals were required to be reassigned or removed if he or she had served in the building for 3 or more years, without the opportunity for the school, district, or state having the opportunity to discuss the benefits or costs of these decisions (Kutash et al., 2010a). The four turnaround models allowed under RTTT are:

- **Turnarounds.** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the school’s staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job-embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career-advancement incentives; implement a research-based, aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility.

- **Restarts.** (Charter School) Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart
model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.

- **Transformations.** Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide job-embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher-evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career advancement incentives; implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning- and teacher-planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.

- **School Closures.** Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools. (Kutash et al., 2010a, pp. 2-3)

Race to the Top (RTTT) led to Washington State Senate Bill (SB) 6696, which made the state eligible for competitive federal SIG according to RTTT policy. Under RTTT and School Improvement Grant (SIG) requirements, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) approved Washington State’s definition of persistently low-achieving schools. Washington State’s definition used the system for categorizing persistently low-achieving schools on the list. The categories of Tier I and Tier II were designated as Achievement, Newly Eligible, and/or Graduation (Newman, 2010). Definitions of the categories were consistent with federal language from RTTT (Middling & Harding, 2010):

- **Tier I-Achievement** schools included any Title I school in improvement, corrective action or restructuring that was also among the lowest-achieving five percent in the “all students” group in reading and mathematics for the past three consecutive years.
• **Tier I – Graduation** schools included any high schools that had a weighted-average graduation rate that was less than 60% based on the past three years of data.

• **Tier I – Newly Eligible** schools included any school that had not made AYP for at least the past two years; and was no higher-achieving than the highest-achieving school identified in either Tier I Achievement or Graduation categories.

• **Tier II – Achievement** schools included the lowest-achieving five percent of secondary schools in the “all students” group in reading and mathematics combined for the past three consecutive years.

• **Tier II – Graduation** schools included high schools that had a weighted-average graduation rate that was less than 60% based on the past three years of data.

• **Tier II – Newly Eligible** schools included Title I eligible secondary schools that: had not made AYP for at least the past two consecutive years; were no higher-achieving than the highest-achieving school identified in either Tier I Achievement or Graduation categories; and were in Step 5 of Improvement with a decreasing performance trend. (pp. 7-8)

Under RTTT, Tier I and Tier II schools required interventions including removal or reassignment of the principal if the principal had served in the school for 3 or more years. Under SIG guidelines, the Tier I and II schools became “Models of Equity and Excellence through Rapid Improvement and Turnaround (MERIT)” (Middling & Harding, 2010, p. 21) or “Required Action Districts (RAD)” (Newman, 2010). SIG/MERIT schools and RAD districts were required to meet the following evaluation requirements for teachers and leaders (Middling & Harding, 2010):
(a) implement rigorous, transparent and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals and use student growth factors; (b) reward leaders and teachers who increase student achievement and graduation rates; (c) remove leaders and teachers who do not improve professional practice; and (d) implement financial incentives for recruiting, placing and retaining effective teachers. (p. 22)

States across the nation went to work designing education reforms that were consistent with the priorities and principles required in RTTT in order to be eligible for the historic $4.35 billion available in federal grants. According to RTTT requirements, an unprecedented estimated 5,000 schools would be identified across the nation as persistently low achieving, and therefore their principals would be required to be reassigned. For example, in Washington State, 47 schools were identified across the state in January of 2010 as the lowest performing 5%. According to the RTTT and Washington State SB 6696 legislation, once a school was identified as being on the lowest-performing 5% list, the district was required to select one of four turnaround models delineated in the RTTT document. Data sources were limited regarding school leaders in Washington State; therefore, I worked directly with the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) through personal correspondence to acquire information regarding the secondary principals identified on the list. Specifically, I acquired information regarding the secondary principals who made up 58% of the total group identified on the lowest performing 5% list for Washington State. AWSP was able to research the principals who had been serving in those identified schools in 2010 and to tell me where they were currently serving and their contact information. The participants for this study were identified using from the AWSP correspondence.
Race to the Top Policy Analysis

For the purposes of RTTT policy analysis, I used McDonnell and Elmore’s (1987) concepts of policy instruments; Fowler’s (2009) concepts of policy actors, policy arenas, and policy agendas; and McGuinn’s (2006, 2012) analysis of the transformation of federal education policy from 1965 to 2005. McDonnell and Elmore (1987) stated that “policies work by bringing the resources of government money, rules, and authority into the service of political objectives; and by using those resources to influence the actions of individuals and institutions” (p. 133). Policies use “instruments or mechanisms” to “translate policy goals into actions” (Fowler, 2009, p. 249). McDonnell and Elmore (1987) defined four generic “classes of instruments” found in policies: “mandates, inducements, capacity-building, and system-changing”; and “hortatory or persuasive” instrument was added by McDonnell in 1994 (p. 249).

RTTT policy contains examples of McDonnell and Elmore’s (1987) five classes of instruments. Mandate instruments require uniform behaviors perceived to be more desirable, with prescribed penalties for those who do not comply (Fowler, 2009). RTTT policy mandate instruments are, for example: teacher and leader evaluation systems; standardized student assessments; “data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction”; and innovative “and effective approaches to turn around struggling schools that demonstrate and sustain education reform” (The White House2009, p. 1). According to RTTT, when these mandate instruments are not met, sanctions are imposed on the district, the school, the principal, and sometimes the teachers. An example of a mandate instrument sanction in RTTT policy is the removal of leaders and teachers who do not improve professional practice.
Inducement instruments are the transfer of money in the form of grants, service, or in-kind materials to schools with specific guidelines for how the money will be used (Fowler, 2009). RTTT contains inducement instruments that are connected to resources in the form of competitive SIG and RAD grant dollars with federal oversight of AYP and sanctions. Capacity-building instruments can be defined as the “transfer of money for the purpose of investment of material, intellectual, or human resources” (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987, p. 134). Capacity-building instruments would be considered a long-term investment in education. Examples of RTTT capacity-building instruments include the requirement of schools to implement “rigorous, transparent and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals” using student growth factors; and rewarding leaders and teachers who increase student achievement and graduation rates (Middling & Harding, 2010, p. 22). System change as a policy instrument is used when new behavior is needed by staff who do not respond to the demand for change (Fowler, 2009). RTTT requires underperforming schools to use the system-change policy instrument to increase student achievement and graduation rates, which increases demands on principals and teachers as a result of accountability. Hortatory policy or persuasive instruments use symbolism and imagery which can easily slip into propaganda and manipulation (Fowler, 2009). The publication of test scores, persistently lowest performing 5% lists, and presidential platforms on education through the use of radio and television commercials are just a few examples of RTTT hortatory or persuasive policy instruments.

Policy arenas, policy actors, and policy agendas are all critical elements of education policy development, adoption, and implementation (Fowler, 2009; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Policy arenas are defined as a sphere of intense political activity (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).
RTTT is the most recent education policy to take center stage. Policy agendas work inside policy arenas to gain traction for issues. In the case of RTTT, media-saturated education issues gained traction in policy arenas and subsequently became federal education policy (McGuinn, 2012). Fowler (2009) defined policy actors as those people who are actively involved in policy discourse. Policy actors exist at the federal, state, and local levels. Policy actors play major and minor roles in “policy development, adoption, and implementation” (Fowler, p. 140). Among the policy actors in RTTT are the two major teachers’ unions and their relationship with the Democratic Party, which has brought attention to labor issues in education that have been ignored for years (McGuinn, 2012). School reform debates are now part of mainstream politics which has led to the rise of a variety of private-sector policy actors, think tanks, foundations, and private philanthropists who use private dollars toward RTTT efforts to exert their influence on legislators (McGuinn, 2012). Policy actors from RTTT can be found in political arenas, education circles, special interest groups, and every household in America. Consequently, policy actors have multiplied in these categories of charter school networks, education management organizations, tutoring providers, education consultants, and service providers.

Race to the Top Policy Critique and Unintended Consequences

RTTT federal education policy is part of an education “family” of policies that emphasize accountability. Issues in education reform can often be polarizing. The impacts of RTTT policy have just begun to be studied as the first SIG grants have come to an end. In this examination of RTTT policy, I will address the underlying theoretical assumptions embedded in education reform policy that includes components of accountability legislation such as high-stakes testing, competitive state and federal grants for low-performing schools, and the threat of sanctions for
schools that fail to meet prescribed AYP (Houle, 2006; Meyers & Murphy, 2007; Orr et al., 2008; Rice & Malen, 2003). I will also examine the “loss of both fiscal and human resources as incentives to produce improvements” in student achievement (Orfield et al., 2004, p. 172). RTTT also includes specific teacher and principal accountability and evaluation requirements that are examined in this section (Middling & Harding, 2010). Lastly, included in this discussion is the concept of principal “voice,” which has been a missing component of education policy that emphasizes accountability.

High-Stakes Testing

The underlying theoretical assumptions of educational reform accountability is that “organizational incentives and organizational capacity” positively affect “organizational performance” measured through standardized testing (Sykes et al., 2009, p. 465). Although some, such as Scheurich and Skrla (2001), are in favor of high-stakes accountability testing and laud their positive benefits for underrepresented groups (race and class) of students, others point out “misconceptions, omissions, and flaws” in their argument (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001, p. 2). Valencia (2000) pointed out the “dismal track record our society has had in promoting school success for low socioeconomic status (SES) students and students of color . . . [and the] persistent, pervasive, and oppressive nature of such school failure in addressing the reformation of our nation’s public schools” (p. 2). Valencia et al. (2001) asserted that

What is needed is an accountability model that has a tripartite structure: (a) input (the adequacy of resources), (b) process (the quality of instruction, and (c) output (what students have learned as measured, for example, by tests or other indicators). (p. 14)
However, according to Sykes et al. (2009), the theory regarding how incentives and capacity interact is underdeveloped in terms of its ability to affect organizational performance and school performance. Sykes et al. noted:

In schools that responded to the threats, principals became more directive, rigid, and controlling in their interactions with teachers, which strained relationships and pressured teachers to conform to questionable practices and failed to translate into stronger programs and more equitable learning outcomes. (p. 486)

Advocates for accountability policies such as NCLB and RTTT have focused on closing the achievement gap for underrepresented groups of students through policy mandates (Scheurich & Skrla, 2004). NCLB required states to set educational proficiency levels and to meet AYP, which is the measurement of how every school, district and state in the United States performs on standardized tests, with the requirement that 100% of all students be proficient by 2014 (NCLB, 2001). According to The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (n.d.), if schools failed to meet their AYP goals, they were subject to progressive consequences. Accountability in high-stakes testing remains a controversial issue in education.

**Competitive State and Federal Grants**

One of the major challenges of RTTT is the requirement of underperforming schools and districts to compete for federal grant dollars. Essentially, supporters of accountability testing argue that competitive school funding is a motivator for raising student performance. Ravitch (2013) noted that the principle of competitive funding structures “will gut the promise of fairness and equity, the very rationale for federal aid education, which will result in winners and losers” (p. 10). According to McGuinn (2012), RTTT was a promising approach to federal education
policy through a competitive grant program that has accomplished the goal of having a substantial number of states change their policies in record time. However, funding education through competition for grants is inequitable, and America’s most impoverished communities, where the highest populations of underrepresented groups of students reside, are also at the greatest disadvantage in terms of accessing these funds (Ravitch, 2013).

Ironically, the unintended consequence of these types of legislative decisions was that RTTT created a considerable number of identified schools in need of restructuring that required significant financial support at a time when education had suffered the greatest budget reductions in decades (Cai, 2011; Eilers & Camacho, 2007). According to Ravitch (2013) and Berliner and Glass (2014), RTTT has contributed to the negative perceptions of the education system and has more deeply rooted the notion that America is failing our nation’s children. This development, coupled with an avalanche of budget cuts to education over the past decade, has depleted education’s fiscal and emotional reserves.

Persistently struggling schools continue to exist with little guidance on how to proceed even after competitive RTTT SIG grants have been in place. Smarick (2010) contended that the “U.S. Department of Education signaled its own ignorance” by pointing out that the NCLB law does not specify and offers limited directions “on what to do about persistently struggling schools” (p. 23). NCLB reforms sound laudatory and dramatic but may not be in the best interest of students who are in the highest-poverty schools that struggle the most (Hing, 2010). Finally, of the millions of dollars granted through SIG grants to districts and schools, initial RTTT applications were overly optimistic and dozens of the initial recipient districts submitted
amendments to scale back their original plans (McGuinn, 2012). Some schools had to back out of their RTTT commitment due to their inability to comply with state mandates.

**Threat of Sanctions**

Researchers point to problems with using sanctions as policy levers. According to Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, and Wishard-Guerra (2011), “Mounting evidence suggests that the rationale driving” policy legislation that employs sanctions as policy levers and the way in which this rationale is carried out through policies “may not be effective in producing the desired outcomes and may also harm schools that are most in need” of improvement (p. 172). These problems include media saturated with negative perceptions of the public K-12 school system, policy mandates requiring significant financial support at a time when education budget cuts were at their highest, policy levers that are overly dependent on the capacity of school leaders to turn schools around, and educators’ negative perceptions of the challenge to meet AYP on the part of educators. Yet, most people continue to think their local schools are great, according to Gallup polls (Lopez, 2010).

To educators, reform actions can come across as “arbitrary and ruthless,” especially when principals and teachers are removed for not meeting AYP or for working in schools that are identified as being in the lowest performing categories (Rice & Malen, 2003, p. 654). Policy levers in the form of sanctions and rewards have produced increasing numbers of schools that are identified as *in need of improvement* (INI). Daly et al. (2011) quoted Mintrop and Trujillo (2005, 2007) noting in their studies that “principals in these underperforming systems have been increasingly tasked with developing and implementing reforms to move schools out of INI status” (p. 172).
RTTT and SB 6696 are policies that target personnel as a sanction instead of providing targeted development of personnel. Sykes et al. (2009) stated:

Reconstitution assumes that the school’s stock of human capital is the critical ingredient in school improvement and that enhancing the stock of human capital in low-performing schools is accomplished better through sweeping replacement of personnel rather than through targeted development of personnel. (p. 464)

The use of sanctions as levers for improvement and the pressures on school administrators to meet AYP make it more difficult to recruit highly qualified principals (Winter & Morgenthal, 2002). A national poll of school administrators on NCLB legislation suggested that the educational system is strained and that many principals view policy lever sanctions as punitive (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). With increased mandates for accountability and high-stakes testing, finding candidates for the role of principal is a challenge, especially in schools that are underperforming. As a result, sanction heavy policy legislation places our least experienced leaders in our highest-need schools.

**Loss of Human Resources**

The assumption that wholesale replacement of teachers and administrators will bring more capable and committed staff is at the heart of educational legislation and is a recurrent theme in education reform (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). The underlying theory of reconstitution maintains this argument: Dysfunctional organizations have to be dismantled and reinvented by a dramatically different cadre of employees who not only bolster the stock of human capital in low-performing schools, but also create a culture of success in those educational settings (Sykes et al., 2009, p. 465). According to Sykes et al. (2009), the concept of
replacing teachers and administrators with the expectation of positive results is seldom realized in education reform efforts because reinvented schools often result in chaos and turmoil for novice principals and inexperienced staffs that are unfamiliar with the school, district, and larger community. Consequently, according to these authors, the underlying theory is exposed as more of a myth. The personal and emotional cost varies; however, RTTT has impacted individual principals, schools, districts, and their communities without producing the significant results expected (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Ravitch, 2013).

According to Ravitch (2010), what was intended as an ambitious and lofty attempt to fix our nation’s schools has resulted in high principal and teacher turnover in schools, which diminishes the schools’ ability to develop and maintain supportive and trusting relationships with the students, their families, and their communities. Ravitch (2010) makes a strong argument for common curriculum and the significance of good neighborhood schools, especially in high-poverty communities. She advocates for relying on better teacher education and school-by-school improvements implemented by experienced educators, both teachers and administrators. In her keynote given to the American Association of Secondary Administrators (AASA) in 2011, Ravitch stated the following about leadership:

You are leaders and you know that good leadership is about inspiring your staff, showing them that you believe in them, bringing out the best in them, helping them overcome the obstacles they face, and encouraging them to pull together as a team to do what’s right for students. A good general does not fire on his own troops. (p. 6)

Increased demands on principals as a result of accountability and policies generated by federal, state, and district initiatives created leadership problems that have been studied by
researchers (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). The problem researchers point to is that when policymakers pass policies geared toward improving schools, those policies are carried out by school leaders, and their success is dependent on how capable those leaders are (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Given increased demands and high stakes, finding candidates for the role of principal is a challenge, especially for schools that are underperforming. Replacing the principal in underperforming schools is one of the restructuring choices; however, there is little evidence that superintendents have a definitive way of identifying the best leaders for the job (Cai, 2011; Levin & Fullan, 2004). There is no evidence that replacing principals as a sanction is an effective approach, and inexperienced principals and teachers often replace veterans and more experienced staff in restructuring efforts (Rice & Malen, 2003). However, teacher and principal accountability and evaluations are a significant component of RTTT policy.

**Teacher and Principal Accountability and Evaluation**

Deficits in the teacher and principal evaluation system and tenure have been a focus of concern in RTTT policy. Historically, educators were essentially granted tenure after 3 years in a classroom, regardless of their level of effectiveness. Failing schools are found in urban and rural school districts where poor and inadequate teaching is the paramount internal condition (Meyers & Murphy, 2007). To become eligible for RTTT grants, states had to “remove firewalls and enact legislation that required student-achievement data to be used in teacher evaluation or tenure decisions” (McGuinn, 2012, p. 146). Teacher accountability and evaluation are the design elements of RTTT that teachers’ unions fought. These requirements prompted The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) to move toward
reforming collective bargaining contracts, noting deficiencies regarding current processes and procedures in terms of the length of time due process requires (McGuinn, 2012).

RTTT required states and districts to meet the following evaluation requirements for teachers and leaders (Middling & Harding, 2010):

(a) implement rigorous, transparent and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals and use student growth factors; (b) reward leaders and teachers who increase student achievement and graduation rates; (c) remove leaders and teachers who do not improve professional practice; and (d) implement financial incentives for recruiting, placing and retaining effective teachers. (p. 22)

One of the first school districts to respond to the requirements of RTTT was in Rhode Island. The firing of the administrators, faculty and staff at Rhode Island’s Central Falls High School occurred after teacher negotiations broke down. In accordance with the RTTT turnaround model, Rhode Island was following the requirements that no more than 50% of the teachers could be rehired. Allen (2010) quoted Diane Ravitch as saying she denounced the events in Rhode Island as “mean and punitive,” and Ravitch posed the following question:

Where will they find the 5,000 expert principals to take over the schools that are closed? Where will they find the hundreds of thousands of superb teachers to fill the newly vacant positions? Or will everyone play musical chairs to give the illusion of reform?

(p. 1)

Ravitch concluded that “good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators, and closing schools” (as quoted in Allen, 2010, p. 2).
Sweeping replacement of personnel rather than targeted development of personnel results in evidence that suggests school reconstitutions is, at best, a very risky strategy (Sykes et al., 2009). Smarick (2010) contended that “changing the culture of existing schools to facilitate learning is difficult to impossible” and likens it to “putting old wine in new bottles” (p. 5). In Washington State, in Tacoma, multiple schools were identified as a result of RTTT; turnaround was selected for one of those schools. In addition to school principals being reassigned, more than 200 teachers received layoff notices and had to reapply for their teaching positions, which led to a strike the following September (Blankinship, 2011).

**Principal “Voices” and Education Policies**

In addition to these numerous issues with sanction-oriented policies, several writers have pointed to the lack of “voice” of school leaders in these decisions (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). The Department of Education did not elicit principals’ voice as part of the development of RTTT policy legislation. Instead, numerous think tanks (e.g. Education Trust, Heritage Foundation, and Gates Foundation) became prevalent in influencing policy and had an impact on the passage of NCLB, which resulted in the voice of educators being “muted” (DeBray, 2005). These think tank organizations began to have a strong influence over legislative decisions and gained a voice that was stronger than that of districts, principals, and teachers. Educators were overpowered by outside organizations in a way that left them vulnerable. Voices of the principals are a critical component of a school’s success and of planning for school improvements (Houle, 2006). In districts where principals had no voice, findings revealed a lack of successful outcomes (Grubb & Flessa, 2006).
The National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) adopted the tagline “Take Back the Conversation” as a result of RTTT policy in 2013. Similar grassroots efforts are coalescing in educational communities where educators, parents, and influential leaders are opposing punitive policy levers. The Federal Department of Education (DOE) launched the Principal Ambassador Program in 2013 in an attempt to include the voice of the principal. However, their selection process produced three charter school principal ambassadors from the East Coast, a disappointment to the NASSP and principals across the nation. Consequently, public school principals continue to feel underrepresented and underserved by the federal DOE, lacking as they did a voice at the national table on educational issues. The reassignment of principals and the impact RTTT has had on individuals is an area that has not been studied.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Principal reassignment is a complicated personal and professional experience and is difficult to process for those impacted by this RTTT requirement. Making sense of the phenomenon constitutes one aspect of the experience; assessing the human costs of the experience constitute a second aspect of the experience. Therefore, two theoretical frames inform the design of this study and the analysis of data. The sensemaking concept, drawn primarily from Weick’s (1995, 2005) work, informs the problem and purpose of the study to explore how principals “made sense” of their reassignment in retrospection. While sensemaking has been used primarily in organizational studies, this framework is suited to the study of human behavior within the education setting, specifically how individuals “negotiate and adapt” to change (Paull, Boudville, & Sitlington, 2013, p. 1). The second theoretical frame, drawn from
Rice and Malen’s (2003) analysis of the human costs associated with accountability reforms, will serve as a sensitizing concept for data analysis.

**The Sensemaking Framework**

“The concept of sensemaking” literally means the “making of sense,” wrote Weick in 1995 (p. 4). According to the sensemaking theory, although people may not share meaning, they do share experience (Weick, 1995). Organizing is the act of trying to connect meaning to events through “conversation, justification, faith, mutual effort (heedful interrelating), transactive memory, resilience, vocabulary, and by seeing what we say in order to assign it to familiar categories” (Weick, 2009, p. 39). According to Weick (1995, p. 51), Starbuck and Milliken (1988) described sensemaking as the ability to “comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict . . . and to place stimuli into some kind of framework.” Once a complex experience moves into an order or articulated understanding, new patterns are identified, categorized, and labeled, and the complex becomes understood at higher levels (Ancona, 2012). As Weick (2009) explained, “Order, interruption, recovery; that is sensemaking in a nutshell . . . efforts to hold it together are made necessary by interruptions such as regression, thrownness, inconsistency, cosmology episodes, forgetting, the unexpected, threats, and disasters” (p. 39). Weick (2006) also noted, “Sensemaking is tested to the extreme when people encounter an event whose occurrence is so implausible that they hesitate to report it for fear they will not be believed” (p. 1). Additionally, Weick (1995) offered the notion that “a crucial property of sensemaking is that human situations are progressively clarified,” and most often situational outcomes develop prior to definitions of the situation; therefore, this sensemaking clarification often works in reverse (p. 11).
The sensemaking framework has been used in a variety of research studies to examine how individuals respond to complex experiences and situations (Ancona, 2012; Kearney, 2013; Kezar, 2012; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Paull et al., 2013). Ancona (2012) “outlines ten steps to effective sensemaking” for leaders to “explore the wider system, create a map of that system, and act in the system to learn from it” (p. 3). Paull et al. (2013) note studies of “ordinary situations,” such as Chenail and Maione’s (1997), where “sensemaking has been used as a lens for researching clinicians who must simultaneously make sense of their experience,” and Browning and McNamee’s (2012) study, in which sensemaking was used to “explore leaders in temporary situations” (pp. 1-2). Weick (1995) refers to “organizational shock” situations, in which the shock “interrupted an ongoing flow,” which led people to try to make sense of what happened (p. 85). Sensemaking during “crisis and change” is an area studied by Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), who note that “both are often situations characterized by ambiguity, confusion, and feelings of disorientation” (p. 3). Kearney’s (2013) study researched emotions and sensemaking and considered the challenges that arise for personnel when the “primary organizational leadership—with the potential to reshape every facet of the organization—can raise a host of concerns” and the emotions individuals experience as a result of leadership change (p. 901). Kearney (2013) applied the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969), which is related to the emotions of “death- and dying-related grief” and the emotional stages . . . of “denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance” (p. 905) to assist in understanding the emotional process. Maitlis (2005) applied sensemaking to the social process in organizations, which led to “four distinct forms of organizational sensemaking: guided, fragmented, restricted, and minimal” (p. 21) and the concept of “stakeholder sensegiving”
Maitlis (2005) defined “sensegiving” as the “attempts to influence others’ understandings of an issue” (p. 22). Kezar (2012) examined sensemaking and sensegiving in higher education—specifically, how “stakeholders continue to invest in important and deep changes they think are necessary for the vitality and health of higher education” (p. 761). Thus, sensemaking for reassigned principals as a result of RTTT is well situated in the framework of sensemaking.

Seven Characteristics of Sensemaking

According to Weick (1995) “sensemaking has seven distinguishing characteristics that set sensemaking apart from other” ways of explaining processes (p. 17). The seven characteristics of sensemaking are identity construction, retrospection, enactment, socialization, continuation-ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. Additionally, organizational sensemaking occurs in roughly this sequence of seven characteristics, which are described below:

**Identity construction.** “Sensemaking begins with a sensemaker” and does not occur in isolation (Weick, 1995, p. 18). Humans create their identities through the process of interacting with others. Sensemaking is “a process derived from the need individuals have” for “a sense of identity” (Weick, 1995, p. 22). The interpretation of self may be the most important idea in sensemaking given that the concept is grounded in identity.

**Retrospective.** According to Weick (1995), “The most distinguishing characteristic of the present conceptualization of sensemaking is the focus on retrospect” (p. 24). Weick explains, The idea of retrospective sensemaking derives from Schutz’s (1967) analysis of “meaningful lived experience.” The key word in that phrase, lived, is stated in the past
tense to capture the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it. (Weick, 1995, p. 24)

**Enactment.** According to Weick (1995), enactment is the activity of “making that which is sensed,” whereas interpretation “explains how people cope with situations that already exist” (p. 30). Weick noted, “Sensemaking better explains how situations get there in the first place,” whereas “action is a precondition for sensemaking as, for example, when the action of saying makes it possible for people to then see what they think” (p. 30). “Noticing,” “manipulation,” “interpretation,” and “framing” are all events in sensemaking (Weick, 1995, p. 35). Weick (1995) points out two cautions when considering enactment: First, creating is not the only process that can produce action; and second, people perceive the world as fixed with stable reference points, which leads to “idealism, nihilism or subjectivism” (p. 37).

**Socialization.** Human thinking and social functioning are essential elements of sensemaking. Terms that reference socialization are *networks, shared meanings, common language, and social interactions.* A person’s “conduct is contingent on the conduct of others” (actual, imagined or implied presence of others) and the influence, feelings, behavior, interpretations, and interpreting of social situations (Weick, 1995, p. 39). The alignment of shared meaning and social construction can be influenced by generalizations, prototypes, stereotypes, and roles.

**Continuation-ongoing.** Sensemaking never starts and never stops as people are always experiencing their lives. Sensemaking is the act of focusing on the past. Sensemaking is the slice of moments taken from a continuous flow to extract cues from those moments and requires insight (Weick, 1995). People find themselves thrown into situations and have to make sense of
what is happening. Winograd and Flores (1986) described situations of thrownness in terms of six different properties:

(a) You cannot avoid acting; (b) You cannot step back and reflect on your actions; (c) The effects of action cannot be predicted; (d) You do not have a stable representation of the situation; (e) Every representation is an interpretation; (f) Language is action. (pp. 34-36)

Everyday life puts people in situations of thrownness. Interruptions are a signal that changes are occurring, linking emotions with sensemaking. Emotion is what arises when an interruption occurs (Weick, 1995). When a person experiences emotions and recalls them later, the emotion tends to be experienced similarly (Weick, 1995). According to Weick (1995), “Past events are reconstructed in the present as explanations,” with the attached emotion from earlier interruptions resulting in feeling-based memories, which makes the process of sensemaking more difficult (p. 49).

**Extracted cues.** According to Weick (1995), “People can make sense of anything” and find phenomena everywhere, which can be a disadvantage (p. 49). Sensemaking is the process of examining what people notice, extracting cues, and noticing what they extract. Weick observes that “extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what is occurring” (p. 50). What is extracted becomes dependent in two important ways: context and frame (search, scanning, and noticing), and interpretation (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Weick, 1995). Extracted cues are crucial for evoking action and often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.
**Plausibility.** Sensemaking “needs to be agreed on and constructed plausibly” (Weick, 1995, p. 55). According to Weick (1995), accuracy is not necessary; however, the breadth of informational inputs is crucial. Although accuracy is not necessary, “what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story” (p. 56), which can be told in the form of “myths, metaphors, platitudes, fables, epics, and paradigms” (p. 61). For that reason, “Stories are templates, products of previous efforts at sensemaking; they explain and energize” (p. 61). Furthermore, A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking. (p. 61)

Sensemaking is plausible, coherent, reasonable, socially acceptable, and credible. A good story is works like a map and can assist in understanding experiences reflectively.

**Sensemaking and Maps**

Weick (2001) likened sensemaking to maps; maps provide unfamiliar situations with a course of action, thereby reducing anxiety. Mapmaking is an essential part of sensemaking, especially in times of uncertainty; as Weick puts it, “Sensemaking involves coming up with a plausible understanding a map of a shifting world; testing this map with others through data collection, action, and conversation; and then refining or abandoning, the map depending on how credible it is” (as quoted in Ancona, 2012, p. 3). Through mapping and talking about events that happen in their lives, people are able to interpret and bring sense to situations and act accordingly. Often fear of the unknown sets in when the world as we know it shifts; sensemaking helps us organize our surroundings and gives us grounding (Weick, Sutcliffe, &
Obstfeld, 2005). A map is only the starting point; therefore, taking cues from the environment, incorporating new information, and turning useful information into direction is how a person makes sense of situations (Weick, 1995). Creating maps can help create meaning of an organizational structure; leadership capacity is dependent on our ability to use sensemaking as a core skill allowing us to “break through our” fear “of the unknown and lead in the face of complexity and uncertainty” (Ancona, 2012, p. 15).

**Sensemaking and Leadership Capacity**

According to Heifetz (2009), adaptive challenges require people to respond by accessing skills or knowledge outside their existing skillset. Sensemaking refers to how people structure unfamiliar situations so they know how to act (Weick, 1995). When the world becomes unintelligible and a person is confronted with unexpected circumstances, sensemaking is a way to adaptively adjust (Heifetz, 2009). At a professional and a personal level, sensemaking can help individuals categorize and label events in order to assimilate new meaning. Therefore, “sensemaking calls for courage, because while there is a deep human need to understand and know what is going on in a changing world, illuminating the change is often a lonely and unpopular task” (Ancona, 2012, p. 4). Sensemaking seeks to find the story (Weick et al., 2005). It is the process of trying to apply order when it does not exist and figuring out how to maneuver through difficult situations that present chaos to an existing order. Ancona (2012) calls sensemaking a “key leadership capability for complex and dynamic events” (p. 1). Leadership relies heavily on sensemaking and the ability to understand the environment and establish a vision people will be inspired to follow—a core leadership capability.
Ancona (2012) pointed out that once people have made sense of changes in their world, they can fit the new reality with the current circumstances; they also have a better idea of how to move forward and how to use their leadership capacity in conjunction with visioning, inventing, and relating. Inventing new directions when faced with adversity is a sign of resilience in a leader or team. Sensemaking is a complex concept and involves “exploring the wider system, creating a map of the current situation, and acting to change the system to learn more about it” (p. 11). Sensemaking may be most needed when we feel under threat or crisis, and the very mechanisms that get engaged to deal with fear are the ones that can hamper sensemaking . . . these are times that the understanding of the world seems inadequate and people are surprised by events. (p. 11)

Ancona further noted that “unpredictable events, shifting politics, economic uncertainty, environmental and social conditions” pose challenges every day and that there is a need to make sense of the world when this happens (p. 15).

The Human Costs Framework

Reconstituting schools and the human costs attached to this type of education reform approach was studied by Rice and Malen (2003) more than a decade ago. In their research study, Malen et al. (2002) looked specifically at “theories of action” in relation to reconstituting schools and the intended outcomes of legislative policies. Testing the “theory of action” based on all the data suggested that policies “embedded in reconstitution reforms may be seriously, if not fatally flawed” (p. 119). The hypothesis behind reform policy is that reconstituted schools reform aims to dramatically improve student achievement. The Malen et al. research team found that this
reform resulted in “marginal adjustment versus comprehensive redesign” (p. 125). Malen et al. reported, “In this case, reconstitution did not yield either the political or the educational outcomes that the superintendent and others sought” (p. 130). Researchers noted that “although school reconstitution can take a variety of forms, generally speaking, this strategy involves removing a school’s incumbent administrators and teachers” (Rice & Malen, 2003, p. 635).

High-stakes testing and performance-based standards are noted by the researchers as contributing to the use of the administrator and staff turnover option, which they asserted was an underexamined option (Rice & Malen, 2003, p. 636).

The purpose of the study was to identify key elements of the theory of action during 2 years of examining reconstituted reform that was implemented in a large urban district. The researchers conducted 360 formal and informal interviews with representatives from across the school system. In addition, they observed classrooms formally and informally 150 times and invested more than 350 hours of observing multiple layers of school system meetings and work. The Malen et al. (2002) case study included three types of data: documentary, interview, and observational. Malen et al. noted that their

Data analysis involved scrutinizing sources to (a) identify prominent patterns as well as exceptions to them, (b) lay out the “chains of evidence” that supported, contradicted or qualified emergent themes and interpretations (Yin, 1994), and (c) develop narrative accounts of the participant’s expectations of and experiences with the reform during the first and second year of its implementation. (p. 115)
Malen et al. (2002) observed that the problem with reconstitution was the assumptions that were embedded in the reform policy. They also viewed this type of reform as a policy intervention. According to Malen et al.:

We focus on the most prominent and fundamental [issues], namely, (a) that reconstitution would meet the immediate aim of creating more capable and committed faculty and staff, (b) that the resultant changes in the composition of the faculty and staff would advance the intermediate aim of redesigning schools, and (c) that the redesigned schools would realize the ultimate aim of improving student achievement. (p. 114)

Malen et al. (2002) noted a high turnover in the newly hired staffs at the schools they studied, and that the new staff, both teachers and administrators, had limited experience. In addition, the staffs were hired late in the summer and there was an overarching sentiment of negativity among staff who were required to interview in order to stay at their schools. Inexperienced principals and teachers replaced veterans and more experienced ones. Malen et al. noted that “feelings of being “thrown into a frenzy” and being “dazed”, “shocked”, and “overwhelmed” were common themes heard by the research team” (p. 124). According to Rice and Malen (2003), in spite of 3-year commitments, teacher turnover was high in the reconstituted schools they studied. In tracking the data over time, researchers found that interviews demonstrated high attrition and in some cases administrators were moved prior to 3 years. It appears that principal and teacher turnover is high in reconstituted schools (Rice & Malen, 2003). Rice and Malen pointed out that very little data existed to support reconstitution as a successful approach. They identified the problem as follows:
This study demonstrates that, although the stated aim of reconstitution is to enhance the human capital available in low-performing schools, that aim may not be realized. Instead, reconstitution reform may impose substantial human costs, which undermine the ability of this reform to achieve its primary aim. (pp. 636-637)

Rice and Malen (2003) developed the human costs theoretical framework as a result of their study. Therefore, their study delineated the three human costs related to reconstitution, which came from theoretical literature on costs: “(a) task costs, (b) social costs, and (c) psychological costs” (p. 637). Rice and Malen concluded that the policies and practices that were required by NCLB (rewards and sanctions) engendered costs; a toll was taken on human capital, and the promise of support to the schools by the superintendent was not realized. Rice and Malen reported that their findings demonstrated “that the reconstitution reform we studied did not realize its primary aim of enhancing human capital in the target schools” (p. 647). They concluded that “the reform came across as an arbitrary and ruthless action” (p. 654). Rice and Malen further noted, “In this case, both the primary targets (educators) and the intended beneficiaries (students) of the reform repeatedly paid a high price for school reconstitution” (p. 658). Rice and Malen referred to NCLB as a “personnel-targeted reform” (p. 640), calling for policy makers to understand the costs and benefits of such reform as well as alternative options. Rice and Malen’s empirical insights emphasize the importance of paying close attention to these costs in the context of reform efforts.

Summary

To date, the professional and the personal role and impact of principal reassignment resulting from RTTT have not been specifically researched. Findings for the impact on staff
have been researched. Unique to this research and RTTT federal legislation is the stipulation of the removal of the principal in all four turnaround models if the principal has served in their buildings 3 or more years. Absent from the research is substantiation that 3 years is an adequate amount of time to have accomplished turnaround status. On the contrary, most research points to the 3- to 8-year mark as a gauge for successfully turning around a school in trouble.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) responded swiftly to the requirement of principal reassignment, but to no avail. The wheels were set in motion and superintendents and districts began the process of reassigning principals, while states quickly began creating policies that paralleled RTTT in order to become eligible for highly competitive School Improvement Grants (SIG). Unfortunately, hundreds of principals leading schools identified as persistently low achieving across the nation were reassigned or removed without recourse.

Gerald Tirozzi (2009), president of NASSP, began responding to policymakers’ seeming inability to understand the role of principal. The primary role is instructional leader with a focus on improving student learning outcomes and is complex. However, the new evaluation of the principal is confined to standardized test scores and on-time graduation rates. In 2009, Tirozzi called for the resources and professional development to enhance the role, the time to complete the job, and respect for the time commitment and schedule. Tirozzi noted that according to the turnaround models, after reconstituting schools the next principal will have all the autonomy that the previous one did not. Tom Vander Ark, former Gates Foundation head, was quoted by Tirozzi as stating: “Even for really good providers, when they are dropped into circumstances where they don’t have control over who they can hire and how they can spend their money, it’s
going to be a limited proposition for them to succeed” (p. 2). Tirozzi concluded that in the eyes of the Obama administration, principals hold exclusive accountability.

Little research supports this dramatic approach to fixing underperforming and failing schools. What was intended as an ambitious attempt to fix our nation’s schools has resulted in high principal and teacher turnover in schools, which diminishes the ability of school employees to develop and maintain supportive and trusting relationships with the students, their families, and their communities. Nowhere in McGuinn’s (2012) policy analysis is the mention of the removal or reassignment of principals mentioned, nor is it analyzed as such. Principal reassignment has garnered little significant research, adding to their already voiceless experience of principals. Given that approximately 5,000 principals were slated to be reassigned across the nation in 2010 as a result of RTTT requirements, it is remarkable that the topic is nearly invisible in the research.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore how K-12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of the experience of their reassignment under the provisions of Washington State’s version of the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation (2009). There were six participants in this study, three female participants and three male participants. Their collective years of educational experience ranged from 14 to over 35 years. This study focused on the memories and perspectives of principals who experienced reassignment under the provisions of RTTT implementation. Weick’s (1995, 2005) concept of sense-making and Rice and Malen’s (2003) human costs framework were used as conceptual frames to inform the study. The sensemaking concept, drawn primarily from Weick’s (1995, 2005) work, informed the purpose of the study: to explore how principals “made sense” of their reassignment. In addition, sensemaking guided the study’s methodology. Qualitative, phenomenologically oriented interviews were used to explore participants’ narratives regarding how they made sense of their experiences. The second theoretical frame, drawn from Rice and Malen’s (2003) analysis of the human costs associated with accountability reforms, served as a sensitizing concept for data analysis. The research questions that this study attempted to answer were: (a) How do principals describe what happened when they were reassigned? (b) How did principals work with staff, students, district, and community around the issue of being reassigned? (c) How did reassignment impact principals emotionally, personally, and professionally? (d) What are principals’ evaluations of this type of policy approach? and
What were the human costs/benefits associated with reassignment? This chapter will explain the study design and methods and ethical considerations.

Methodology

The qualitative research interview seeks to explore the meanings in the life experiences of the study participants. Kvale (1996) noted that qualitative interviews explore both factual descriptions and meaning. Interviews are useful in learning about a participant’s experiences. My approach to interviewing in this study was influenced by Seidman’s (2006) model for phenomenological, in-depth interviewing, which is a three-part process that includes life history, detailed experiences, and reflection on the meaning of experiences to participants. In addition, Kvale’s (1996) seven stages of interviewing were used as a resource in the design of this study:

1. **Thematizing**: Formulate the purpose of the investigation and describe the concept of the topic to be investigated before the interviews start.

2. **Designing**: Plan the design of the study, taking into consideration all seven stages, before the interviews start.

3. **Interviewing**: Conduct the interviews based on an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought.

4. **Transcribing**: Prepare the interview material for analysis, which commonly includes a transcription from oral speech to written text.

5. **Analyzing**: Decide, on the basis of the purpose and topic of the investigation, and on the nature of the interview material, which methods of analysis are appropriate.
6. **Verifying**: Ascertain the generalizability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings. Reliability refers to how consistent the results are and validity explains whether an interview study investigates what is intended to be investigated.

7. **Reporting**: Communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a form that lives up to scientific criteria, takes the ethical aspect of the investigation into consideration, and that results in a readable product. (p. 88)

In my approach to interviewing, I departed from Kvale’s (1996) model related to reliability and validity in stage six. Qualitative researchers tend to disagree about the epistemology for validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) substitute the concept of “trustworthiness for validity” (p. 1). Guba’s (1981) constructs for trustworthiness include four criteria: “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 64). According to Seidman (2006), trustworthiness in interviewing affects every aspect of the process with the goal of minimizing effects of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee on the data and how experiences are reconstructed. For the purpose of this study, I used “trustworthiness” in lieu of verifying. Trustworthiness requires the ability to establish confidence between the interviewer and interviewee.

The aim of phenomenological interviews is to accurately represent participants’ experiences and affective responses (Creswell, 2009). The phenomenological approach usually focuses on a small number of participants and is designed to promote understanding of the participants’ common experiences. Elements of phenomenological studies include the researcher’s ability to *epoche* (refrain from judgment), or bracket, biases and set aside prejudices and assumptions in order to open the self to others (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam
(2009), “Phenomenological reduction is the process of continually returning to an experience to derive” meaning, then isolating a phenomenon in order to understand its essence (p. 26). Creswell (1998) refers to the meaning of an experience, as the “essential invariant structure . . . which emphasizes that experiences have outward appearances and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning” (p. 52). Merriam (2009) also describes the process of “horizontalization” as examining the data by assigning “equal weight” to each data source and organizing the sources into “clusters or themes” (p. 26). In addition, Merriam suggests viewing data from various perspectives, a process referred to as imaginative variation. The researcher should come away with a better understanding of what an experience was like for someone else. A phenomenological approach to interviewing is appropriate for this study because my purpose is to accurately represent the experiences and affective responses of the principal participants who were reassigned.

**Study Design and Methods**

This study is a phenomenological inquiry (Merriam, 2009) into the human experience of a phenomenon as lived by the 41 principals in Washington State who were reassigned as a result of RTTT federal legislation and SB 6696 state legislation. The results of this study are unique due to the fact that Washington State acquired a waiver from the federal government for such extreme personnel-targeted sanctions in 2012. Thus, the principal participants in this study were the first cohort to experience reassignment under RTTT legislation in Washington State. Since the waiver was granted in 2012, school districts have had more autonomy in making decisions regarding principals, even in the schools identified on the lowest-performing 5% lists. However, in 2014, Washington State lost the NCLB waiver from the federal government had to revert back
to the regulations of NCLB, meaning that, if schools failed to meet their AYP goals, they were subject to the progressive consequences prescribed by RTTT.

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted in 2012 with three of the principals who had been reassigned, and that data was used to inform this study. The purpose of the pilot study was to explore the principals’ lived experiences of reassignment. The pilot also functioned to test the protocols for interviewing. In addition, I used the human costs analysis theoretical framework (Rice & Malen, 2003) in analyzing pilot study data to find common themes in the interview data. The sensemaking framework (Weick, 1995) was added to this study as another potential analytical frame as a result of the pilot study. All of the pilot study participants were from the secondary level: Two of the participants were from the middle level and one was from the high school level. Each narrative produced by the interviews was unique to the interviewee, as each district made individual decisions based on RTTT and SB 6696 legislation as it interpreted the policies and the range of choices that were included in the four turnaround models. In some cases a single principal was reassigned, while in other cases where multiple schools were identified, approximately 200 staff received notices of dismissal and were required to reapply for positions in the district with no guarantee that they would be re-hired. Additionally, different turnaround models were adopted for each school. Consequently, the degree of impact of the application of the legislative policies was different depending on each district’s approach. The 16 interview questions (see Appendix B) used in the pilot study were developed to elicit the experiences of the participants following the notification of reassignment, after the publication of
the list of schools identified as lowest-performing 5% in the state. These interview questions were adapted for the present study.

In analyzing the pilot study data, the human costs of reassignment emerged as a major theme. The analysis of these costs to participants aligned with the human costs (task, social, and psychological) framework developed by Rice and Malen (2003). Task costs in the pilot study in all cases included the principal having to communicate to staff what was planned for her or his reassignment, as well as the plan for the school, as a result of RTTT implementation. In the case of one district, the decision to use the transformation model for one school and the school closure model for another resulted in 200 staff notifications of dismissal. The task of notifying staff fell to the principals in that district. Ironically, another task in the pilot study was that two of the three principals became the co-authors and overseers of the SIG grants received by their districts. In addition, other themes that emerged from the data were grief and loss costs, personnel-targeted costs, and competitive funding for education costs. One principal designed grief and loss cards that she distributed at the staff meeting when she was required to tell her staff the school would be closed. She used these cards to help staff navigate their journey through the process of not only losing their jobs, but also closing the school.

Social costs in the pilot study included principals’ having to manage the social costs to their staffs and students throughout the process while setting aside their own grief and loss to help others. Other social costs described by principals included having to answer frequent questions about their reassignment and perceptions by others about the reasons for reassignment. Consequently, the experience of reliving the process in social situations and of retelling the story had both a social and a psychological cost.
Psychological costs were evident in principals’ using the phrase “like a death” and talking about the anguish they experienced as a result of being a principal of a school on the lowest-performing 5% list. Principals had perceptions of instantly becoming a “failing principal” in spite of the fact that they had always been successful. Psychological costs to each individual principal, teacher, and student, while difficult to measure, were described by each principal in terms such as “failure,” “devastating,” “lost confidence,” “embarrassed,” “like a death,” and “never get over.”

The costs of principal replacement reverberated throughout the school communities in which these principals worked. Conclusions from the pilot study findings included major costs for each of the principal participants; however, each principal found various ways to deal with those costs. Also, it was clear that principals went through a process of making sense of their reassignment and that over time they were able to give meaning to their experience.

The findings of the pilot study influenced the design of the current study. The results of the pilot study informed the present study by helping in the revision of the interview questions, establishing the usefulness of the human costs framework in understanding principals’ experiences, suggesting the adoption of the sensemaking framework, and validating the need for a more in-depth study of personnel-targeted education policies.

**Participant Selection**

This study expanded the database of the pilot study to include a larger sampling of principals reassigned in 2010. As did the pilot study, the present study focused on secondary principals in part because the majority of the schools (58%) identified for principal reassignment were at the secondary level. In addition, secondary principals share other common experiences,
such as those arising as a result of contending with scheduling, a larger numbers of students, extracurricular activities, and reparation for and earning of credits toward graduation. There were six principal participants in this study; including the three from the pilot study, three female participants and three male participants. Their collective years of educational experience ranged from 14 to over 35 years. Purposeful sampling was used to find additional participants from the original list of the 41 public school principals in the lowest-achieving 5% of schools.

Because the topic of this study was sensitive, it was helpful to recruit participants to whom I was known. For example, I used connections I had around the state through my involvement with the Association for Washington State Principals (AWSP), the Washington State University (WSU) Superintendent Cohort groups from 2011 and 2012, and the WSU Doctoral Program, each of which provided me with some connections to potential participants who had some familiarity with me. According to Seidman (2006), purposeful sampling can include snowballing, where one participant leads to another one and so on until at some point the researcher has to decide she has interviewed enough. Snowballing was used in this study as participants suggested additional participants. In the end, I had more principals available through purposeful sampling than were needed for the study, as Seidman (2006) indicated might happen. To select the additional three beyond the pilot study group, I simply selected the first three that met the criteria for the study. The three principals interviewed in a pilot study were included in this study and were re-interviewed using additional questions as developed for this study. Follow-up interviews were conducted based on the transcriptions of the first interviews in order to capture specific in-depth information from each participant.
Data Collection and Analysis

Interview data were collected from the principals regarding their personal and professional experiences as a result of reassignment under RTTT implementation. As with the pilot interviews, these interviews were transcribed by me with limited assistance from a transcriber. Transcribing during the pilot study allowed me to become very familiar with the data, to be self-reflective about the interview process, and to begin the process of coding and analyzing the data immediately following the interviews. The interview protocol used in the pilot study (Appendix B) was adapted for the present study (Appendix A). In brief, I reduced the number of questions and revised them in alignment with the revised research questions for the study. In addition, the revised questions were more open-ended and reflected the principles of both phenomenological inquiry and the sensemaking framework guiding this study. The in-depth interview questions for this study were constructed with the intention of eliciting responses directly connected to the research questions and the two theoretical frameworks selected for this study. To conduct the interviews, I contacted the participants initially by phone or e-mail to set a time for the interview. Research participants were informed about the purpose of the interviews and the main features of the design. I disclosed fully about being one of the 41 principals reassigned in 2010. Participants also needed to agree to the release of identifiable information that could emerge because of the phenomenological nature of this study. Each interview took approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted in person if possible or by phone, depending on each participant’s availability. I offered each participant a $10 Starbucks card at the close of our interview process.
In analyzing the data, I used Kvale’s (1996) stages specific to analyzing the data: transcribe, analyze, and report. According to Creswell (1998), “Phenomenological data analysis” begins with the process of reduction, which is the “analysis of specific statements and themes,” and continues with “a search for possible meanings” (p. 53). Categories used in analysis of transcriptions include “significant statements, meanings of statements, themes of meanings, and exhaustive descriptions of phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 59). Transcribing the interviews allowed me to become very familiar with the data, be self-reflective about the interview process, and begin the process of coding and analyzing the data immediately following the interviews. I sorted the interviewees’ responses into categories based on the research questions. Analysis of the data also included assessment of the human costs and sensemaking theoretical frameworks in the examination of the interview transcriptions. In alignment with Merriam’s (2009) approach to phenomenological data analysis, I made every effort to epoche (refrain from judgment) or “bracket” my biases and set aside prejudices and assumptions in order to be open to the data, used the phenomenological reduction process of repeatedly returning to transcripts to derive meaning, and then isolated a phenomenon in order to understand the essence of each participant’s experience. I used the process of horizontalization by examining the data and assigning equal weight to each data source, and then organizing the sources into clusters or themes. In addition, I used Merriam’s (2009) suggestion of viewing data from various perspectives, using objectivity. The data analysis process assisted me in acquiring a better understanding of what the experience of reassignment was like for someone else.
Ethics

The United States government’s 1979 *Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of the Rights of Human Subjects of Research* established “three basic ethical principles that must be observed” when researching human subjects: “respect for persons,” “beneficence” (do no harm), and “justice” (Seidman, 2006, p. 58). As indicated previously, I disclosed fully about being one of the 41 principals reassigned in 2010 and worked to develop trustworthiness with each of the participants. I demonstrated respect for each participant and made every effort to practice beneficence and justice in the in-depth interviewing and reporting of this study. Ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and potential consequences for the interviewee were taken into account given the sensitive nature and small sample size of this qualitative interview study. Every effort was made to minimize any risk for the participants in the study. Confidentiality and respect for what could be perceived as a difficult and painful experience were considered as I asked participants to bring up their memories of reassignment and associated issues. I took every measure to be empathetic and sensitive to each participant’s process of reliving and retelling his or her story. I made every effort to conceal the identity of all participants, including using pseudonyms in order to protect their identity, especially in light of the fact that this was a small group of individuals for whom data from their schools and districts that were specific to RTTT implementation were identifiable. When necessary, I changed descriptors to protect the identity of the participants.

Logistical considerations include procuring informed consent forms signed by the participants. Informed consent forms usually have two purposes: “to facilitate communication between the interviewer and participants” and to record “basic data about the participant that will
inform” them about how the data will be reported (Seidman, 2006, p. 52). I communicated these two purposes specific to this study to the participants. Seidman (2006) discusses eight major parts of informed consent for in-depth interviewing that must also be considered: “an invitation to participate in what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom; risks; rights; possible benefits; confidentiality of records; dissemination; special conditions for children; and contact information and copies of the form” (pp. 61-62). Confidentiality forms were signed by participants to allow the interviews to be audiotaped and transcribed. I honored participants’ right to privacy and their right to withdraw at any time in the process, as well as to request that their material from the interview be withheld.
The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore how K-12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of the experience of their reassignment under the provisions of Washington State’s version of the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation (2009). Weick’s (1995, 2005) concept of sensemaking and Rice and Malen’s (2003) human costs framework were used to guide the study and as sensitizing concepts in analyzing the qualitative interview data. This chapter presents the analysis of the data resulting from the interviews with the principal participants. To illustrate the findings in this study, the stories of two principals are first presented; then the themes that emerged across the data from all interviews are presented. In addition to the two conceptual frames introduced above, Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) was also used in analyzing the data. In this chapter, participants and their districts have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. Some details that might identify participants have been purposefully omitted.

Participants’ Stories

Laurie’s Story

Laurie was a successful middle-school principal for several years prior to her reassignment. She was leading a middle school in a large urban school district while at the same time pursuing her superintendent certification. She was notified by her superintendent in January of 2010 that her school was identified in the state as being in the lowest-performing 5% in the state. She learned that she would be moving to a position in the central office (which happened within weeks) prior to any public announcement, and she noted that this gave her “some time to
really think about it and grieve a little bit privately before it went public.” Laurie was affected in various ways immediately following the news; she also found that her experience of reassignment was closely linked with her emotions:

You know it was so hard for my ego. You know I really questioned my own leadership and all the decisions that I made and had I made the right decision, and I really questioned who I was as a leader, and I think that has made me a better leader now, because I know that beyond a shadow of a doubt the decisions that I made would have been the same ones I would have made back then. Knowing what I knew, and you know what, I was a darn good leader. And that question. I should have never had those questions, and no one ever asked me that, no one ever said, “Laurie, you don’t know.” But, I did hear hints of “How can you be the director when you have a low-performing school?” You know, just that whole judgment was so hard on my own ability that I just am very cognizant about leaders and who they are and their growth.

Laurie described the trauma felt throughout the district as approximately 200 teachers, along with principals and assistant principals, received dismissal notifications and had to reapply and interview for positions. Ironically, she found herself co-writing the SIG grant that would eventually require her removal from her principalship. She would also become the new district leader for the middle schools identified on the list for school improvement (eventual SIG recipients); however, her impression was that “there were lots of people that didn’t believe in my ability after being labeled as a failing principal.” One article in the local paper that identified Laurie by name, with photos, had the headline “Failing Principals.” Appalled, Laurie noted, “It
had my name, my biography, and listed all nine principals with their names and faces. It was awful! Really, it was really a pretty good article, but the title sucked.”

Laurie was frustrated that she had not had the SIG resources to lead in her principal role before her reassignment. Since she too was directly affected by RTTT and SB 6696 legislative decisions, she knew firsthand what her colleagues were experiencing emotionally. After Laurie took on her new role at the central office, she had the task of communicating information to teachers in schools. She described the experience of teachers and the painful task of assisting them through their emotional journey of reassignment:

That part I still struggle with because I had such amazing people, and they were just ripped out of where they were and were told by a system, “You’re not good.” . . . And were told by principals (who basically had to take them) . . . And so it was like they were the lepers, so I really struggled hard with that, because, there wasn’t anything I could do except bear witness. I felt this huge [responsibility] and I felt that they needed to hear from someone. And so, I don’t know, maybe it was just my coping, I just felt like it was important. And it backfired, it backfired on me, a couple of people probably to this day will never talk to me, but I felt like they at least heard from me and didn’t hear through the grapevine and didn’t get it in a memo.

The autonomy of newly appointed SIG principals was something that Laurie also pointed out. The grants allowed for greater principal authority over hiring and firing. Principals of SIG schools hired instructional coaches, principal assistants, assistant principals, and teachers on special assignments. Looking back, Laurie reflected woefully on what she might have been able
to accomplish with these same resources. She also felt for her colleagues and, reminiscing about a colleague, stated:

*You know I have a principal that was transferred and they had no input, and she’s grieving, she’s hurting bad now and I recognize that, I understand that even though I was not the decider. It’s about conversations and relationships and if you’re going to have people leave, you have to know them. And if there were difficult conversations that needed to happen, you shouldn’t be alone in that.*

Following RTTT implementation, teaching staff experienced major upheaval. Human resources surveyed staff as directed by the school board following the changes to staff. Survey results revealed the costs of the changes to be extraordinary; staff reported “*that they [district leaders] were not responsive and they were not kind to the people during that time.*” According to Laurie, this unkind behavior ultimately cost the superintendent his job. District-level personnel were not willing to go out to the schools and deliver the news about reassignments and notification of teacher dismissals; however, Laurie chose to take on this task.

*It probably should have been one of the directors under the superintendent—remember I was the principal on special assignment at that time—so I volunteered to go out [to the schools]. . . I went out as the spokesperson from the district with the HR [human resources] person and I went out to my staff . . . I remember my husband saying, “You shouldn’t be the one that goes out there.” I told him, “I have to because I care about them.” At that point nobody else was really caring. I just remember those were the hardest things, and now I know I can do anything. I just remember sitting in my car going, “Oh, Gawd, I do not want to do this. I do not want to go tell all these people what*
was going to happen!” It’s amazing they didn’t stone me or throw things at me or swear at me and I see them now and they’re just loving, so they knew the role that I had but, boy! The human cost of that really cost our superintendent his job, I believe, and the HR director.

In year two of the dramatic changes in the teacher ranks, this district experienced a strike that originated with Laurie’s previous school’s staff. Strikes in school districts take years to recover from, and Laurie tried to tell central office that a strike was imminent:

Oh, yeah, we had a strike. We had a strike . . . and it was because of [her former middle school] and a lot of the work that had happened at SIG, not all, because there’s been some really good work but people just had had enough. They did not trust [the superintendent] and they felt they were not caring and they were done. We hadn’t had a strike in 36 years . . . Nobody here at the district thought they were going to strike in the spring and that was the first year of SIG but I knew it, I knew it. I said, “They don’t think it’s going to happen but it is.” And it did. I learned a lot, I just really learned a lot. You know all of it has to do with the human capital. Every single bit, whether you’re talking students or you’re talking staffing.

Acquiring sufficient funding for education prior to RTTT policy was challenging, and Laurie noted that the new policy made acquiring funding for education competitive. As principal, she had tried for years to gain approval for new curriculum. Laurie knew she needed additional resources for her students in order to close the achievement gap, but her request was denied by the district. She described the response she received:
We hadn’t had extra money other than LAP funds and there’s a whole history of other things that I had gone to the assistant superintendent and the district and requested because I knew that our scores were low and really the answers had been, “No, no, no, no, no!” So it was surprising. I was surprised.

Regarding the Department of Education (DOE) and policy and legislation that led to these outcomes, competitive funding for education, and the experience of principal leaders, Laurie stated:

Well, I certainly think that the Department of Education should not be telling superintendents how they should be doing things. I had an opportunity to [meet] some people from the Department of Education and I was just stunned by the Department of Ed folks who were overseeing our grants for all these states. They probably are 30 years old and I don’t know if they spent a lot of time in the schools, maybe a year. I think they are very smart people but I certainly don’t want them telling me how to run a school when you haven’t even been old enough to have kids. WOW! I spoke up a lot at that. Based upon what I heard there has been a lot of political pressure throughout the nation that is not the role of the Department of Ed, when they say, “We’ll give you the money under these conditions…” It’s unacceptable to me that that had to happen.

At the time of our second interview, which took place 4 years after her reassignment, Laurie was a superintendent in a small district. This was what she had to say about education policy:

Well unless policy is local and takes into account the autonomy and the needs of the individual communities of which they serve, the policy can damage, or it can inform, or it
can be a support . . . . Right now we are really caught in a confluence with the waiver and AYP. We’re caught with labeling persistently low-achieving schools. We’re caught in all of these pieces and it’s not doing anyone any good at this time. You know the public can only take so much negativity about public education and the alternative is—what? So, you know that’s my question. So the alternative is, if we get rid of public education then what do we have?

Laurie’s current district had three elementary schools that were identified as low performing based on AYP accountability measures of the previous fall. In smaller districts especially, the challenge of finding teachers and principals is significant. Parents are required to be notified when the school their children attends has been identified as “failing.” Laurie said this about the challenge:

*It’s harder than ever, at least in our area; we don’t have teacher candidates. I mean people are not going into teaching, so all of this rhetoric has come out and all of the funding that hasn’t come forward, you know; young people are not going into the profession and it’s really a concern. You know these turnaround schools, I don’t know—are we just going to keep churning and churning instead of financing some real powerful professional development for people and making them better? You know there’s not a huge group out there that are going to be better than what we have.*

When reflecting on RTTT policy and the requirement of reassignment or removal that was implemented if the principal had served for 3 or more years, Laurie had this to say:

*I really believe 3 years is too short. The research is coming out that’s really clear about that. It’s a good 5 to 6 years. It’s ironic because we’re starting some work in this*
district and I keep telling the board this is a 5- to 10-year plan. This is not going to be—it’s not going to be instantly there and so, when you’re reflecting on school improvement efforts, if it takes you 3 years to get into it, it’s going to take you longer to get out of it. And give people time to do that, give them time and support. And if they’re not the right person, absolutely replace them, but it shouldn’t be because you’re identified. It should be because you’re not a right fit or they’re not the right person to do that job. But if they are the right person, then that’s where the local control needs to come.

Laurie’s final thoughts on policy were these:

*I think it’s become very evident that policy shouldn’t drive practice. It should inform . . . policy should be kind of a collaborative effort that you can define what that means for your own community . . .* ESEA, obviously the whole idea that they’re not even passing anything and now we’re back to this not allowing waivers is harmful for those schools that need it the most. And I think with this whole turnaround department of education, I believe it’s an overreach. I don’t believe the Department of Education should be mandating things of that nature like this. It hasn’t been successful in Chicago if you look at all their turmoil over the last few years. I think that it’s an overreach and I know that local legislators do not support overreach of educational Department of Ed things. So I hope that we will be able to have more local, state control and hopefully your paper will be cited in many defense arguments. Now being in a rural community I’ve learned many more things of inequities being in a small compared to a large urban school district. It’s just really interesting, because if we don’t inform our legislators then who will do that,
who will they listen to? They want to be good stewards, they do, but if they don’t have relationships then they don’t know who to believe.

Laurie’s journey has taken years for her to process. Reflecting back on her reassignment, Laurie said that everyone told her she should have kept a journal, to which she replied, “I wish now I would have kept that, but I think it would have probably been a little bit too laden with emotional pieces.” She expressed that this experience was “so difficult . . . it was really like a death.” In her third year following the decisions resulting from RTTT and SB 6696, Laurie believed she was stronger and wiser, and she expressed gratitude for the extreme experience and the certainty that she could face any challenge education and life might present. Laurie had developed coping skills from the extreme circumstances of reassignment and leading in her new role with courage through very difficult times. She noted: “I’m a much stronger person now and nothing fazes me. I’m fairly unflappable.”

Annie’s Story

Annie was recruited to lead a middle school as a result of her success as an elementary principal. Annie had been leading the middle school for several years with very good evaluations. She was notified, that as a result of her school’s being identified on the lowest-performing 5% list for the state, that the district chose the RTTT policy school closure model. After having her staff take leading roles in the levy campaign that year, and serving on a design team for the planned rebuild of a new replacement for the middle school where she was serving as principal, she was abruptly informed in January of 2010 that her school would be closed. The rebuild plans would be aborted. Annie was devastated. The architect’s model of the new school, which sat under a glass dome in the main office, was the first item to leave the school, at Annie’s
emphatic request: “One of the first things I had them do was take that—I’ll just say this—goddamn model out of the office of the new school because obviously that wasn’t going anywhere.” The series of costs that followed were immeasurable for Annie, the teachers, the students and their parents, the school district, and community. Annie reported that her supervisors told her: “‘Don’t tell anybody’ . . . and I said to myself, I really needed to tell the office coordinator, so [she] came out to the car and I said, ‘Things aren’t looking good, and I need you to stop a couple of orders.’” Annie attempted to keep the district’s secret; however, the school was in the process of ordering a number of items for the new school, and she had to stop those orders.

Concern for her staff was Annie’s first priority after learning of the school closure and her own imminent reassignment.

Staff was all displaced . . . so that created this massive turmoil of chaos in HR and across the district in terms of making this work. And, how it impacted me directly was that my staff was just a mess in terms of where they were going to be next year and what they were going to be doing . . . well the superintendent dismantled curriculum and instruction and sent the director to [the school] to help with the process and she was obviously on the way out . . . so having her was helpful, but they didn’t give her to me, I didn’t feel to be helpful to me, they gave her to me to get her out of downtown. . . . So the biggest part that spring I think impacted directly the teachers, who just for months didn’t know what they were going to be doing.

Coping with her grief, and that of the staff, was a challenge for Annie as they navigated all the losses and trauma throughout the remainder of the school year. Since she had a few
weeks to mentally prepare for the inevitable staff meeting in which staff would be notified of the school closure, she made the staff business cards that listed the stages of death and dying. Annie was also able to write an article on closing a school for the AWSP principals’ journal, which she sent me following our interview, along with the business cards. Unfortunately, the district did not handle the process of closing her school with sensitivity to the staff, and the impact on staff began on the day that the superintendent was due at a staff meeting and informed them of the decision to close the school. A news reporter and cameras arrived at the school prior to the planned notification from central office and the staff were told of the school’s closing:

    And he said to the secretaries, “We’re here to cover the meeting where the superintendent’s going to tell the staff that the school is closing.” And so the secretaries started freaking out . . . I called the district’s PIO [Public Information Officer] office and I said, “You’d better get down here because this is not my problem, this is your problem.” . . . And so they came right out, and the superintendent was there, and so I had prearranged, premade these little business card-sized cards of the five steps of death and dying, you know, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. I had those ready to go along with a couple boxes of Kleenex in this library.

Since Annie had been in a planning process for the design of a new school, she decided to use the same group to plan meaningful ceremonies to symbolically close the school for the students and the community. She also did things for the staff to take care of them in lighthearted ways:

    Every Sunday night, I baked a cake with alcohol in it . . . and so I started out with a Kahlua cake, and then we moved on to Drambuie chocolate cake, and whatever else. . . .
So every morning in the staff room, they knew they could count on a nice little Bundt cake... and so we did stuff like that.

Unfortunately, the costs to the entire school and community were significant. Annie reported that the students began sharing with the teachers that “if they had done better on their tests, the school would not be closing.” Heartsick by the effect the school closure had on the students, Annie to this day continues to carry their WASL scores in her purse and stated: “I’m not exactly sure, but when I look at the WASL scores, which I just happen to keep with me at all times, just for old times’ sake, isn’t that sick...” Annie had not only to manage her own grief and loss in the situation, but also to lead with tremendous courage. Annie said, “To me personally, I’m not sure I’ll ever get over this.” The teachers, the support staff, and especially the students looked to her to bolster their own courage to navigate the rest of the school year, and it was only February. Annie said this about the transition her students made to their new schools the following year:

- *I think those kids went through a really tough transition and finding their way in a school that wasn’t in their neighborhood, didn’t have kids like them, teachers didn’t want them; I mean the kids had a reputation of you know, fighting or whatever, being disrespectful, whatever, and it wasn’t any—those percentages weren’t any higher than any other school in [the district]. So I really felt sorry for the kids in that transition the most.*

Prior to this event, Annie had been recruited to the middle level from elementary as a result of her successful transformation of a previous school. She reported:

- *At first I naively thought that they would put me at [another middle school] ... because [her school was an] International Baccalaureate school and actually we got our IB*
status confirmed, which is a huge deal, huge . . . We got it that spring of 2010 after they had decided to close the school. I was the only principal in the district who had gone through all three levels of IB training and so I figured because they wanted [the other middle school] . . . to be an IB school, then they would just put me there. That would be the obvious logical choice.

As it turned out, Annie was given three options of elementary schools to lead, and she chose the highest-poverty school in the group. At the same time, one of her fellow colleagues was not offered options and was dismissed. Going to an elementary school was not a career choice that Annie had considered; therefore she shared her desire to go back to the middle school:

I begged to go back to a middle school, I begged for them to put me in a middle school because, it wasn’t on me that they closed that school, I was cleaning it up in a million different ways, and the superintendent was looking for, I still think younger people . . . people of color . . . which I get that, um to be, to build you know, their loyal cadre I think and so that was part of the deal as well. So, the last couple of years I have begged them to put me back at middle school and they have not done that. So it’s evident that I’m not going there.

The elementary-school placement resulted in a reduction in pay, which translated as a financial cost to Annie. According to state law, the first year after reassigning a principal to lower level, the district is required to pay the principal according to her or his previous pay scale for at least 1 year. In order to secure her previous salary, Annie had to enlist the assistance of the state Association of Washington Schools Principals (AWSP) (which included legal representation) and eventually secured 2 years at her previous rate of pay. She learned through public records
that her reassigned male colleagues, in some instances, were paid at a higher rate than they had been before reassignment. Her colleague who was reassigned to the central office received an increased salary during the first year and another increase in the fall of the next year.

The district kept insisting on referring to closing activities as “celebrations” until Annie emphatically asked them to stop because she and her staff found this phrasing not only insensitive but also insulting. In addition, her staff voted that the superintendent should not attend the closing ceremonies, a request that the superintendent honored. Students ended up being bused the following year to three different schools (most went to one of two schools) that had socioeconomic income levels that were among the highest in the district. The students were not well received by the teachers or the original students, and they struggled with the transition. The transition to middle school is already an emotionally charged event in the life of an adolescent. The students were already feeling inadequate based on their test scores and blamed themselves for the closure of their school. This was a source of great grief for Annie. She shared these thoughts about warning others about her story and about the parents from her school community:

“I’ve told a couple of colleagues that, you know, “Be careful, if they say your school’s up, I just need to tell you a story” . . . The community there is still angry about that, and they’ve had meetings as recently as last week with the current superintendent about one of the feeder elementary schools. They’re looking at maybe expanding it or doing something to it, and so people came to these [three] meetings . . . and at least at two of those meetings parents [from her previous school] stood up and said how angry they still were over this . . . . [They asked] how the district could possibly have done this. . . . The
teachers . . . went in a million different directions and when I see them, you know they all
just have this sad look in their eyes, like “Oh.” . . . You know, we were doing such good
stuff . . . but they bounce back and are doing nice work at the schools they’re at . . . but I
do n’t think they’ll ever be the same either.

Our second interview took place 4 years after Annie’s reassignment. Her reflections on
closing her school had not changed, and she had this to say about the school closure:

I went through a capricious move to shut that school down. So it vindicates me when I
look back and say, “They shouldn’t have done that.” I can look back and realize this is
really stupid. Ironically enough, once they shut down that middle school there was
nothing. There was a bigger drain on . . . [the] school district than they had ever had
before and now they are realizing that they made a huge mistake shutting a west side
school. Now they are in the process of planning for a school near where [her previous
school] was [to] pick up those kids so they don’t lose them. So ironically enough it
played out.

Autonomy of the newly assigned SIG principals was an issue Annie pointed out as being
interesting to watch. SIG principals received a significant amount of resources and the ability to
hire and fire staff and bypass the union collective bargaining agreements (CBA). In sharing what
she observed regarding the principal who followed her, Annie noted:

It’s been interesting to watch, of course they got everything; I mean he could pick every
single teacher that he wanted in that school . . . he handpicked every single teacher, so he
got good ones from [middle school that was closed] and good ones from other schools
across the district as well . . . and he got two APs [assistant principals], and he’s only got
like 650 [students], something like that, so it’s not the biggest school in the world, but he
got two APs, two full-time coaches; I mean if you can’t do it with that kind of staff, I
don’t know what is going to happen . . . a ton of money and at any time he could look at a
teacher, and he did, and say, “This isn’t working.”

Her district experienced more principal reassignment in the years that followed her reassignment,
which she perceived to be disruptive to individuals and to the schools. On the topic of policy,
Annie had this to say:

Maybe the principal is totally inadequate. I mean God knows that is a distinct
possibility. But maybe not. Maybe they just need a new staff. Or maybe they need new
resources, or maybe they need a second or third coach for academic [support]. There
are a lot of pieces to this puzzle. I just think it is unfair that it is just the principal . . . we
need to get more involved politically with our representatives or the Ed committee, to
help them understand the process better and how they could better serve and support
schools that are having some academic failings. That would make the most sense to me.

Annie’s sensemaking journey to date is not complete, and during the second interview,
her emotions were similar to those she expressed in the first interview. The emotional disruption
and financial costs resulting from the reassignment were seen as exponential for the district,
staff, students, their families, and the community. Annie still carries the Measurement of Student
Progress (MSP) scores for her middle school in her purse as a reminder of her reassignment
experience. Annie’s emotional wounds she experienced at the hands of the central office were
still raw, and she was reminded of the experience daily because the route to her new elementary
school assignment included driving by the middle school where she wanted to be reassigned.
The turmoil that happened as a result of RTTT and the closure of Annie’s school had come full circle. The district was back to the planning stages of building a new school in the community close to where Annie’s previous school would have been built.

**Summary of Participant Stories**

In the two principal participant stories presented, common themes of multiple costs to the principal, staff, and students emerged. Although each principal faced unique challenges, once they were notified of their impending reassignments, they approached the months and years that followed differently based on their reassignment locations. Laurie became the co-author of the SIG grant, was assigned a central office position with a raise in salary, and was assigned the task of overseeing the SIG principals in the district. Annie’s school was closed, all personnel were displaced, Annie was reassigned to an elementary school, and she found herself seeking support to maintain her current salary. Both women assisted their staffs in different ways. Laurie described making the conscious decision to be with staff when they were notified because no central office administrator was willing to meet with them face to face. Annie prepared grief and loss business cards for the staff to have during the announcement at a staff meeting. Both women described their reassignments using terminology related to grief and loss. Laurie described costs to staff that led to the first strike in the district in 36 years. Annie described costs to staff, students, and the community resulting from the school closure as substantial.

Each of the principals had strong opinions regarding the RTTT policy legislation that led to their reassignments. Both principals expressed the belief that RTTT policy has multiple unintended consequences. Making sense of their reassignments was a process for both principals, and sensemaking stages were experienced by each. These and other themes were
repeated throughout the stories told by participants. In the next section, the major themes and subthemes that emerged across the data are presented.

**Major Themes and Subthemes**

The major themes that emerged from the data analysis were (a) costs of reassignment associated with RTTT policy implementation, (b) principal critique of this type of policy approach, and (c) the sensemaking journey of each principal impacted by reassignment. In addition, subthemes emerged in the major themes in the data analysis. Subthemes of the major theme of costs included costs to principals in three areas: personal emotional costs, the experience of grief and loss, professional costs, and financial costs. Costs subthemes also included costs to teachers, costs to students and parents, and costs to school districts and communities. Subthemes of principals’ critique of this type of policy approach included: (a) unintended consequences of RTTT policy; (b) the number of years required to successfully turnaround a low-performing school; (c) RTTT policy’s lack of alignment with good practice in schools; (d) RTTT SIG grants’ failure to demonstrate notable benefits to students; (e) competitive funding for education is a flawed approach; and (f) the importance of political action and principal “voice” in shaping education policy. The sensemaking journey of RTTT policy implementation included these six stages that emerged from the data analysis: (a) self-perception prior to reassignment; (b) response to notification of RTTT reassignment; (c) announcement to staff, students, and community; (d) new assignment and responding to others reactions to reassignment; (e) retrospective reflections on personnel-targeted policies; and (f) reflection and rebuilding confidence. Each of these themes and subthemes is discussed in the following section.
Costs of Reassignment Resulting From RTTT Policy

As the two participant stories illustrated, principals experienced costs. In addition, the reassigned principals also noted multiple costs to teachers, students and parents, school districts, and the communities. The analysis of these costs to participants aligned with the human costs (task, social, and psychological) framework developed by Rice and Malen (2003).

Principal Costs

The costs of reassignment under RTTT implementation to principals were profound. According to the six principals interviewed, all experienced varying degrees of costs personally, emotionally, professionally, and in some cases financially. Subthemes of the major theme of costs included costs to principals in four areas: personal emotional costs, the experience of grief and loss, professional costs, and financial costs. Costs subthemes also included costs to teachers, costs to students and parents, and costs to school districts and communities.

Personal emotional costs. Personal emotional costs were described by all six of the principal participants despite some of the superintendents’ attempts to ease the costs for some of the participants. Still other participants described significant insensitivity on the part of the superintendents or central office staff who worked directly with them on their reassignments. Participants described personal emotional costs including stress costs, physiological costs, psychological costs, loss of self-confidence costs, depression costs, and grief and loss costs.

Henry was leading a middle school in a district where two of six middle schools were identified on the lowest-performing 5% list for the state. Henry noted that the superintendent, the chief accountability officer, and the deputy superintendent told Henry that if they did not meet one of the stipulations of RTTT policy, they would not qualify for the SIG grant; and,
although they would have liked to have kept him at the school, RTTT eligibility criteria required
that he be reassigned. The cost of stress emerged as an emotional cost for reassigned principals.
Henry noted that his supervisors were all expressing confidence in him; however, the bottom line
was that no one could tell him at the end of the year that he was going to have a job, and this
uncertainty did little to mitigate the cost of stress he experienced. Henry described how
reassignment affected him personally. He stated:

_It was very stressful. But everybody did try to build up my morale. They kept telling me
that they wanted to keep me in the district and they couldn’t tell me that I was going to
have a job. . . . When they finally told me what school I was going to go to it was a huge
relief, unbelievable . . . but it was tough knowing I was going to go the next year._

A physiological cost was experienced by most of the participants. To illustrate this cost,
Henry described his physiological experience regarding his reassignment:

_Just even thinking about it . . . I’m to the point now where I don’t have a physiological
response to it. I used to get goose bumps and my heart rate would go up just thinking
about it. And just remembering, if I got a call in my office from the district office,
regardless who it was I was freaked out. I was so indebted to it, and the verbiage that
was going on with the school and staff . . . it pretty much involved my being for a while._

_It was a stressful period._

A combination of stress costs and physiological costs made the experience of reassignment
substantial for Henry. The SIG process took a toll on him, and he remembered being at a
meeting when his wife phoned to tell him their children had the stomach flu and that she needed
him to come home. Henry recalled:
In my vocabulary SIG was almost like stomach flu. There was a meeting that we were going to have . . . My wife called me [because the kids had the stomach flu] and [he remembered thinking], “I don’t know what is worse . . . what I’m coming home to, or another SIG meeting.” I was so tired of the SIG meetings.

From that day forward, Henry referred to all things SIG as “the stomach flu.” In our second interview Henry said it took 3 to 4 weeks before he could actually talk to his supervisor without breaking a sweat. Psychological costs were also experienced by the participants, and Henry’s experience illustrates these costs. After receiving the news from his supervisor, Henry went into his office and did not want to talk to anybody. He reported having the following thoughts:

> I am kind of a worrier. [He thought.] “I’m hosed. Screwed” . . . I loved my school and loved working with . . . children and high-poverty situations. I learned more about cultures than [from] any classes I’ve taken and prep programs. I told them I wanted to be here. . . [His supervisors said.] “We have an idea, but we value [you] being here.”

Once I started hearing things like that I could talk to people about the school improvement plan. It was embarrassing. People would tell me over and over: “Don’t be embarrassed, when we say it isn’t about a principal,” you were clearly moving so yeah, it is about you . . . That’s awesome that you feel that way, but it sure as shit feels like it is happening to me. It is all about me.

Loss of self-confidence, as well as other emotional responses, emerged from the data as costs. Participants described emotional and physical responses and the loss of self-confidence in the interview process that took them years to recover from, and in some cases, participants stated, “I don’t think I’ll ever get over this.” Daniel spoke of “losing his confidence” and
having feelings of “failure” in spite of evidence of gains and positive student and staff outcomes during his leadership. Daniel could not avoid the dozens of people who would ask him why he was no longer the principal of the high school in his small district. These are questions from community members that he continues to answer today. He referred to the experience as being “brutal.”

That’s what I went through, . . . well it’s, in a sense, it’s Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; if you don’t feel safe, it’s hard to be a risk taker, and you know, have confidence in what you do, if you feel like you’re, one step away from getting chopped, you know (laugh). . . Yeah (heavy sigh), so . . . it just took a while to get my feet under me and feel like, OK, I’m good, and you know, I’m in a small town and so everybody everywhere I go [people] would say, “Now why aren’t you at the high school again?”’, and “Oh, that’s too bad.” You know and so like oh I just got tired of it.

Marie described the cost of depression as a result of reassignment and the significant hardship of feeling “low.” Marie described her last few months leading her school as “really rough,” and said that she was “at times very lonely” and that she could not tell anybody about her imminent reassignment. Later she was reassigned to a high school as an assistant principal. She explained that the “blow to my professional ego” meant that it took a while for her to even apply for another principal job. Marie lost confidence and did not want to face the possibility of rejection; she was not sure if she was up to that task anymore. She indicated that multiple people asked her why she had moved to the high school, a question she found difficult to answer. She said, “It never really goes away.” Marie related the following experiences as a result of her reassignment:
I have a very supportive family. It came at a time when my kids were much older. So I will tell you that I have gained a lot of weight. You talk about personal stress. I gained about 20–25 pounds. It has taken this past year to be healthy again. Physically, I was not doing well. Part of it was depression . . . and [I] started to lose the weight again. How much it affected me? I didn’t want to be that size. I was eating poorly. Just not really taking care of myself. And not really feeling like I wanted to.

To this day Marie occasionally has a physiological response to the harshness of the reality that she has been demoted to the role of assistant principal at a high school.

I moved before, I tried to make the best of it, but it is still hard. Having been a principal for 10 years and now assistant principal . . . I just threw up the other day [reflecting on her reassignment]. My God why can’t these people figure out that I’m not the principal? I keep getting junk mail with my name on it as principal. And thinking [the principal who replaced her] should be getting this. Let him deal with all this junk mail with my name on it. There is an adjustment.

The stress costs, physiological costs, psychological costs, loss of self-confidence costs, and depression costs were evident throughout principals’ descriptions of the demoralization they experienced as a result of leading a school on the lowest-performing 5% list. Participants also described feelings of “embarrassment.” Psychological costs to each individual principal were threaded throughout their experiences, and, though difficult to measure, were described by each principal in terms such as “failure,” “devastating,” “lost confidence,” “embarrassed,” “like a death,” and “never get over.” These examples of psychological costs are similar to those described in the Rice and Malen (2003) study.
**Grief and loss.** Grief and loss costs also emerged as an important cost subtheme linked to principal reassignment through the participants’ vivid descriptions of their experiences. All of the six principals experienced and described in detail the process of grief and loss throughout the two interviews. As noted in the stories, Annie designed grief and loss cards that she distributed at a staff meeting when her staff learned the school would be closed. She used these cards to help staff navigate their journey through not only losing their jobs, but also the closing of their school. Throughout the stories and shared experiences, the principals’ own words reveal that they experienced multiple instances of grief and loss as they made sense of their reassignment.

Daniel put it this way:

*It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to deal with professionally, and it really hurt, because I felt like I left a vow or something; but you know you put your heart and soul into something and then you have to—you know, it wasn’t my choice to leave. . . . Oh well I was just devastated. . . . Well I was embarrassed for one to be on the list, because I knew we were better than that. . . . nothing bad about the first year, I just didn’t feel, I didn’t feel assertive, I didn’t feel like I was leading the work. . . . I felt like I was cautious and trying to just make sure I wasn’t messing up because of that fear I guess.*

Laurie related her process of grief and loss as she made sense of her reassignment process:

*Oh, I was raw during the first full year even into last year, really; it was probably last September or October that I was done. So it was difficult, you know it really was like a death. I felt that, at least in my mind, that people had questioned my integrity and my ability as an administrator. I had grieved and I was done. I was not going to kick myself anymore. [And], the spring gave me time to really grieve that piece. For me it was very*
shocking! I really didn’t know how to handle it. [And], well you know it did feel that way [like a death], for me it did and four of my teachers, and that was the part I still struggle with because I had such amazing people and they were just ripped out of where they were and were told by a system, “You’re not good.” And were told by principals who basically had to take them, right, because, all the superintendents displaced took all the positions, so principals didn’t have a choice, so our one school had to take like 20. And so it was like they were the lepers so I really struggled hard with that because there wasn’t anything I could do except bear witness.

This study found linkages between the human costs framework of Rice and Malen (2003) and the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969). In examining the principal experience of reassignment and the stages of grief and loss, it became apparent that both frameworks helped to make sense of the data. The Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969), which is related to the emotions of “death- and dying-related grief” and to the emotional stages of “denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance” (p. 905) were found to be closely linked in understanding the emotional process of the principal reassignment experience.

**Professional costs.** Professional costs were experienced by all of the principal participants regardless of whether or not they were reassigned to the central office, as principal to another school, or as an assistant principal. Participants described professional costs as including demotion costs, professional reputation costs, and disruption of career costs. Principals experienced the cost of a perceived demotion and of instantly becoming a “failing principal,” in spite of the fact that they had always been successful based on their evaluations. James reported that even though he retained the title of “principal on special assignment,” he was perceived as
an assistant principal in a high school and as essentially having been demoted. The costs to the participants’ professional reputation were substantial, and reassignment posed a significant disruption to their careers. In some cases, the career disruption costs were a loss of self-confidence for some principals that contributed to their lack of desire to apply for open positions after their reassignments. Other professional costs described by principals included the discomfort of answering frequent questions about their reassignments and the perceptions of others about the reasons for their reassignments. Consequently, the experience of reliving the process in social situations while retelling the story of reassignment had a professional cost.

The cost of “demotion” was an experience the principals who were not reassigned to a central office position experienced. These reassignments were perceived as interruptions to the participant’s careers and were not career moves they would have initiated. Marie’s situation was unique because her replacement arrived months prior to the end of the school year and began making wholesale changes to systems that Marie and her staff had established and become invested in over the years. Observing the incoming principal was not necessarily easy for any of the participants, and this part of reassignment was particularly difficult. Marie shared these thoughts regarding the professional demotion costs she experienced:

I understand that he [her replacement] was a go-getter and he wanted to get things done.

Which is why I think he was an ass. But to come into a school and make all of these decisions without talking to me about why we did [it that way]. It was like all of my ideas were just crap and “I’ve got better and this is the way we are going to do it.”

The replacement principals had autonomy to hire and fire staff, along with a significant amount of infused SIG funding and staffing to support those efforts. All of the participants were
reassigned within their original districts and attended administrator meetings with their successors. Marie noted these thoughts regarding her perceived demotion costs:

_He was able to get rid of people and hire new people and you know . . . what was really difficult for me, for 3 years we had to get with the school board, we had to talk about what we were doing, give them our goals for our school, and we had to sit there and listen to what our old school’s new principal told them they were doing with our [previous] school . . . [It] was really rough._

Additional professional costs for Marie included having former staff reaching out to talk to her about how they were treated by the new principal, which was hard for her to hear. She stayed neutral, knowing that he had his own ideas about things and had even started to make changes before he was in the school. Marie summed up the costs she experienced as causing “huge turmoil.”

In considering the professional reputation costs of his reassignment, Henry felt that the community identified him as “the principal who was demoted.” He shared these thoughts regarding his reassignment professional reputation costs:

_I probably wasn’t as fun a guy to be around for a while. I tried to be a good dad and leave it at work. I might have been a bit different at work, I’m an upbeat person. I probably didn’t look that way. That was another cost . . . My colleagues were great, but it was kind of like that whole scarlet letter thing, where I’d go to meetings and no one made me feel that way, but it was like I was one of the SIG principals . . . I took it professionally. My confidence took a hit._
Laurie experienced disruption of career costs related to her new central office position as she became the “face of the district” for the SIG grant, which she also co-authored in her new role. The dismissal of approximately 200 teachers, and the reassignment of principals, was a result of the RTTT models chosen for her district. Knowing the personal experience of reassignment, Laurie made a point of trying to work quickly and efficiently to reassign principals and rehire the displaced teachers. To illustrate the disruption of career costs, Laurie said:

You know I needed things to happen quickly so I arranged to have the interviews. We did the press release for the new principals, we did the interviews, and then we ended up hiring our two new turnaround principals, and then we closed [one school] and all the staff were all placed. It was a really busy, difficult time. The one thing that was interesting is that the relationship with the union was pretty strong at that point. The [union] president had been a coach for me and I think we all knew there really wasn’t a choice when the superintendent said, “We’re going to go for the grant.” There were certain things that were just nonnegotiable. You know if you’re going to be a turnaround principal there were just things that needed to happen.

Demotion costs, professional reputation costs, and disruption of career costs affected participants negatively. These costs were similar to the task and social costs described in Rice and Malen’s (2003) study. Although they also described associated task costs, the participants focused primarily on their social costs associated with reassignment. Participants described multiple social costs related to their reassignment; examples of these social costs included having to answer frequent questions about their reassignments and facing the perceptions of others about the reasons for their reassignments.
Financial costs. Financial costs were described by some of the principal participants. Although the male participants did not seem to incur loss in financial pay, some of the female participants did experience a reduction in their salaries. Washington State law requires that principals who are reassigned to positions with salaries that are less than their current salaries are to receive their current salaries for 1 year after reassignment. In the case of Annie, she enlisted the assistance of Gary Kipp from AWSP and legal counsel in order to acquire 2 years of pay at her previous salary after her reassignment, while other reassigned principals in her district did not experience the same outcome. Annie described male colleagues who maintained their same salary after reassignment regardless of placement and a female colleague who was advanced to the district office who received two consecutive salary increases within a year.

Males in the study appeared to be more assertive about the topic of salary. James shared these thoughts about reassignment, his salary, and his ability to retain the title of “principal on special assignment”:

You know, I think it’s because I said it wasn’t an option in my opinion, and if they would have tried to change it [his salary] I would have challenged it, I would have fought; it wouldn’t have happened without them putting up a pretty good fight and convincing somebody that I was inferior, that I was receiving bad evaluations or that I deserved what happened to me. In fact, I would tell you the opposite has been the case here. They don’t believe that I was that person; they don’t believe that I wasn’t doing what I needed to do. They believe that they were following the policies to allow them to get additional monies to get that school some monies that might make a difference. And, unfortunately it didn’t.
In the case of Marie, she was placed as an assistant principal in a high school and was returned to the assistant principal salary schedule. Although James’s salary and official title (principal on special assignment) did not change and he continued to receive middle-level principal pay, this was not the case for some of the principals interviewed. Some of the participants who were advanced to central office positions received increases in their salaries.

**Costs to Teachers**

Costs to teachers were experienced in at least one of the districts as a result of the RTTT model chosen for schools. Teachers in this district experienced the loss of their jobs, which was a substantial cost. In one case, school closure was chosen as the RTTT model, and the entire staff was required to reapply and interview for positions in the district. In one school the turnaround model was chosen, meaning 50% of the staff had to be replaced in addition to the principal’s being reassigned. Approximately 200 teachers in these two schools were given notifications of dismissal and were required to reapply and interview for positions in the district. The task of notifying teachers was placed on the principals who were also being reassigned. As a result of efforts to work through the rehiring process as quickly as possible, rehiring teachers became part of Laurie’s district level assignment. She described the overwhelming number of teachers and instructional coaches without jobs, and the need for the district to create a systems-approach to the challenge:

> It was difficult creating systems smoothly at a time when we also had some things going on downtown . . . people were losing their jobs. All of the instructional coaches lost their jobs and were given pink slips. I think at one point we had 200 people without positions.
The costs to teachers didn’t end with the first year of dismissals and rehiring. The principal turnover continued throughout the next 4 years, as did the teacher turnover with the increased autonomy of the replacement principal. In her new role, Laurie described costs to teachers as a result of the process that took place in one of the schools:

As a result, within 2 years he [the new turnaround principal] had over 50% of his staff turn over. They either voluntarily left or moved, because you know he’s been able to hire approximately eight to 10 people extra a year. The dynamic, the change within his staff, has been significant. He truly is a turnaround school that started as a transformation school. That was probably the least impacted in terms of turmoil or angst or losing staff. So you basically have three schools that were totally emptied out. All of the staff were given basically pink slips to say “You are displaced, and you will have a position as a super displaced person when school starts.”

This district encountered significant displacements of personnel in the form of principals, teachers, and, in the case of school closure, support personnel. RTTT policy implementation eventually led to the first strike in one district in 36 years. Districts experienced specific costs that were similar to the task and social costs delineated in the Rice and Malen (2003) study. James described the social costs of how teachers responded to his colleague’s reassignment announcement:

The district came in and made some announcements and tried to address questions and in some buildings staffs were really upset and really bothered by it and I think it was because the principal was bothered by it and that’s the way they presented it to their staffs.
Daniel was born and raised in the community and had attended the comprehensive high school, where his grandfather had been the principal for nearly 20 years. This was a position that he had aspired to from childhood. His staff took his reassignment very hard. Daniel remembered:

*The [RTTT] option we were going to [use] . . . is replace the principal. And, I [tried] find a way to say . . . we’ve done a lot of great things, we’ve gotten a lot of growth . . . I don’t want you to feel like we haven’t been working hard, that we haven't been doing the right things here for kids, it’s just with our data . . . this is the option that the superintendent and school board chose. So, it was a very difficult conversation. . . . there were even teachers crying. . . . I didn't break down or anything, but I was sad.*

Finally, nothing could really compare to the experience of Annie’s entire staff and the process of school closure. In preparation for the announcement to staff regarding the closing of the school, Annie prepared business cards on grief and loss. She shared this about that staff meeting:

*I wasn’t doing the presentation, but I needed to support the teachers after that meeting, and so I made these business cards and all they had on them were the five steps of death and dying. And so after the presentation was made that afternoon by the superintendent I had boxes of Kleenex on the tables in the library, and then I passed out the cards and said, “This is going to be a roller coaster so this is what I’d like you to think about.”*

Reassignment of principals had an impact on the staff regardless of whether the principal was the sole person leaving or whether the changes also applied to some or all of the staff. Costs to teachers were similar to Rice and Malen’s (2003) social and psychological costs.
Costs to Students and Parents

Costs to students and parents were noted by some of the principal participants. In the case of the school closure, Annie noted multiple costs to the students and their families in being displaced to other schools in the district. Those students felt they were to blame for their school closure due to the lack of performance on their “tests” and then were not well received in their new schools. Costs to students and parents can also be seen in staff belief systems and the potential for self-fulfilling prophecies. In reflecting on the overt and covert challenges that students and parents faced, Henry shared these thoughts:

*What is really hard in our schools is that we are about high expectations and we believe that kids can do it, but then sometimes you could make those slogans and bumper stickers seem picturesque, and you think about it, and the steps were difficult. I have heard some of my staff say that “My students are not going to be able to do that.” Some are saying that our kids cannot do the new task . . . After building those relationships the next thing I would have tried there, is that we cannot blame the parents. Immediately you are leaning on that deficit model. That is the worst thing you could possibly do . . . I have had kids in my office that qualified for reading and writing [in special education] and 3 years below grade level. There were 17 items and it was an ELA [English Language Arts] test. Even the kids that worked their ass off and only got two questions right. So, I can celebrate two questions right. He worked his ass off and I know that the next time they will teach those standards. I know he’s going to do better. If you don’t think like that you shouldn’t be here as a principal or a teacher here.*
James was frustrated and specifically felt bothered by how RTTT affected the students and their families in his community. He described monolingual Spanish-speaking families as those who “don’t speak up for themselves, don’t stand up for themselves and don’t represent themselves well.” As a bilingual, Spanish-speaking principal, James shared a unique insight into helping the students and families in his community, as he stated:

My school demographics were extreme [95%] in terms of free and reduced [lunch] and minority population and monolingual parents in the home that only spoke Spanish . . . and I knew that going into it and I thought I was the right person for the job. I’m high energy, I’m high emotion, I’m high passion, I am bilingual, I am perfect for schools like that, but I got moved. And they put in a Caucasian gentleman that was monolingual speaking, and he was really into data and a hermit in his office and didn’t build relationships and lacked communication skills, and it just didn’t go the way they needed it to go.

James speculated about the requirement of removal of the principal if he or she had served longer than 3 years in low-performing schools and offered his thoughts on whether RTTT policy is meeting the needs of Washington students:

I think it was an oversight on their part . . . I don’t think they understood what the ramifications [were] that was going to bring to a school, to a district, to a city. I definitely think that some principals do need to be removed. I definitely think I’m not one of them though and I continue to believe that today. . . . And in the end, I don’t think it would have mattered, because what happened to Washington and what continues to
happen, in my opinion, isn’t addressing the needs of Washington students and that clientele.

In the follow-up interview, James indicated that one of the frustrations he believed exists in schools where poverty is high and language barriers exist for monolingual Spanish-speaking homes, is the barrier of parents who are very trusting and do not question their assumptions, or do not voice their feelings even when they do not agree, because they do not perceive the school as family-friendly. James noted that these families and students need staff who care about students and leaders who understand their families and communities. This was not the case with the novice, monolingual principal who replaced James. Unfortunately, the replacement principal experienced inadequate growth and had difficulty fitting into the school community and was replaced after 3 years. Multiple social and psychological costs to students and parents were similar to the human costs noted in Rice and Malen’s (2003) study.

Costs to School Districts and Communities

Costs to school districts and communities were described throughout the interviews with the participants and emerged as a subtheme in the data. Henry mentioned people in his district who liked working with kids in high-poverty schools and loved the diversity and the challenges that come along with it. Unfortunately, he reported, the staff in his previous school had had six or seven principals in an 8-year period. Henry noted that this kind of principal turnover is damaging to the staff, students, and community of a school and affects the culture negatively. Henry asserted that these factors of turnover could not be beneficial. Unfortunately, schools on the lowest-performing lists do not attract principals for the position.
Another example of community frustration with RTTT policy resulted from the school closure that Annie described. Parents were angry and voiced their displeasure over the 4 years that followed. Laurie noted this result from her new role as superintendent in a rural community and the effects of following RTTT policy on identified schools in her district:

*I could have come in and been gangbusters and “we’re going to move you” and we could have done that. For our community it would have been really devastating because there’s that continuity of knowing children and knowing families and being trusted and the whole label of lowest performing.*

The schools identified on the lowest-performing 5% list for the state of Washington were all found in high-poverty communities, with high percentages of free and reduced lunch rates, high ELL populations, and high special education populations. The challenges that these schools and communities face are difficult to resolve with a short-term infusion of grant dollars, especially when a whole new cadre of leadership is introduced at the same time, given that effective leadership takes years to establish. Rice and Malen’s (2003) costs framework was useful in analyzing the costs to the school districts and communities.

**Principal Critiques of RTTT Policy**

Over time, the reassigned principal participants developed critiques of RTTT policy, which emerged as a significant theme in the data. RTTT policy affected districts, superintendents, and principals at a time when they had not had a voice at the policy-making arena and were forced to make principal reassignment decisions to become eligible to apply for SIG grants. Principals in this study were directly affected by RTTT policy implementation. These principals developed firsthand accounts and opinions about this type of education policy,
which are shared in their words. The subthemes found in this major theme are: (a) unintended consequences of RTTT policy; (b) the number of years required to successfully turn around a low-performing school; (c) RTTT policy’s lack of alignment with good practice in schools; (d) RTTT SIG grants’ failure to demonstrate notable benefits to students; (e) the mistake of funding education through competitive means; and (f) the importance of political action and principal “voice” in shaping education policy.

Unintended Consequences of RTTT Policy

Multiple unintended consequences of RTTT policy were observed by principals in this study. Illustrating unintended consequences of this type of policy approach is the story of Daniel. Daniel was the principal of a single comprehensive high school in a small community district that also included an alternative high school. Three or 4 years prior to RTTT and SB 6696, the district decided to collapse the alternative high school and bring the students back into the comprehensive high school. All of the returning students were credit deficient; most were juniors and seniors with fewer than five credits. This district decision of moving credit-deficient students into the comprehensive high school caused the on-time graduation rate to plummet, which was why the school was identified as one of the lowest-performing 5% of the state. Since Daniel’s reassignment, he reported, his former school had had three principals, which made it difficult for the school to gain traction on closing the ELL gap for students. When asked about the policy legislation that led to his reassignment, Daniel said:

Had I known about this new legislation, I would have fought to keep them [out]; the reason we got rid of our alternative schools is because they weren’t effective and we knew that the kids were not learning at high levels, and even though they were behind we
knew it wasn’t effective. . . . What we were doing there wasn't working and we needed to blow up the system, um if I had known there was going to be such a punitive transition . . . I would have fought not to do that, but I felt it was [the right thing to do at the time].

When the alternative students integrated into the comprehensive high school, the graduation rate dropped to 49.8%. Daniel was able to bring the graduation rate up to 64.8%, but this improvement wasn’t enough to keep the school off the list. Tracking of student movement in and out of the district had not received as much attention as it should have at the district level, which led to some students’ being counted as dropouts. One discovery made was that there were multiple problems with the process for reporting to the state through the state reporting program. An example of this challenge was that students transitioning from eighth to ninth grade who were unaccounted for were counted as “no-shows.” Since this school was in a small community, the turnaround model option, which required removing half the staff or closing the school, was not an option. The restart option was also not viable because charter schools were not legal in the state; therefore, the transformation model was chosen, and Daniel was removed as principal. Daniel expressed this about the RTTT models:

*I wish the models weren’t so restrictive and I wish there was some kind of needs assessment or a way to not just have that be the model. Is [sic] there other ways we can get support with accountability without having to remove the principal? ‘Cause that’s the easiest one, especially in a rural district where it’s so hard to get teachers; we can’t fire half and hire half of them back, there’s just not the staffing to do that and plus it scares people. People get scared and they hunker down go back to silos . . . so I would just hope that in the future that there’s a way to measure principal effectiveness with
feedback from the leadership team and staff, that they’d be able to stay on, because I tell you what, having those resources is essential and if you have a leader that has that vision, I’d hate to replace them because that can be detrimental.

A second illustration of the many unintended consequences of RTTT policy was offered by Henry. He observed that a “one size fits all approach” is ultimately inequitable and that this type of education policy approach is flawed. According to Henry, RTTT has kicked things into gear; however, Henry noted these unintended consequences regarding RTTT federal policy and districts’ ability to sustain changes when the SIG grants expire:

*It was a little too much control without knowing, I hesitate to bring up context, but different states are different and different districts are different and all sizes fit one, and we have this cash . . . and that’s too much control of the government when you put such a price tag on it and what do they get it for, 3 or 4 years. It is crazy; I think that some people said they didn’t want it . . . but it’s [a] great and shiny object. But what do we do when we don’t get it? It felt a little like this is really out of our control. It is almost insulting, or shortsighted to say, “Let’s throw a bunch of cash at a school and see them do better” . . . I think the huge flaw is that the money is a grant and the money is gone, and then you cannot sustain it if you have an extra principal, you cannot fund that out of your school budget.*

Henry expressed the belief that positive things happen in schools because of the people who are in the schools. He also suggested that some schools that received SIG money did not attain deeper achievements or gains. He observed that his relationships with staff constituted an area of strength in his leadership. He mentioned people in his district who like to work with kids
and love their work in a high-poverty school district, where they love the diversity and the challenges that come along with it. Unfortunately, his previous school had had six or seven principals in 8 years. This kind of turnover is not necessarily helpful and affects the culture among the staff, subsequently affecting the students and the culture. Henry opined that these factors of turnover cannot be beneficial.

**Number of Years Required to Successfully Turn Around a Low-Performing School**

A significant subtheme in the findings concerned the RTTT requirement of all four models to remove the principal if they had served more than 3 years in an identified school. The participants reflected on the number of years it takes to successfully turn around an underperforming school. Daniel noted, “*Any type of big initiative, it takes 5 years to really implement it effectively.*” James offered these reflections on the requirement of removal of the principal if she or he had served more than 3 years and the negative effects of high principal turnover following his reassignment:

> Principals in other schools, they know their clientele, they know their staff . . . I will tell you, what hurt the progress of the school 3 years ago, 4 years ago, and what’s hurting it now, is every time they bring in a new leader it takes time to develop trust and relationships. . . . People are feeling each other out, and you know what, you don’t have time for that. You have to have that established when you get the money, or when you get the additional support, or you get to try to do new things [so] that the staff believes in you. They trust you and they follow you.

Laurie was very specific regarding her thoughts about the number of years it takes for a principal leader to successfully transform a school. She stated:
The first year really is all about storming . . . the second year is about that norming, what is working, people are seeing results. We saw minimal results from last year, we saw a little bump, and last year was much smoother. We had systems in place. We had understandings, and it was really time for the principals to be able to focus and to start really getting good at systems. The third year really is about sustainability. It takes 5 years . . . 3 years is really about money to me. We’re going to fund this for 3 years, right? If they were serious about it they would fund it for 5 because we saw significant gains actually, well in all but one. [Her previous school] has not really been a success story. Last year we replaced the principal halfway through the year, well actually at the end of the year, so there is a new principal, so really it’s another turnaround school this year with new systems and about 20 new staff at that school . . . It is starting over again. Actually the scores are as low as they’ve ever, ever, ever been. They dropped 19 in math and in eighth grade they dropped to 12 and when I was there they were at 33.

Laurie spoke about the number of years it takes principals to effectively turn around a school by using terms from Tuckman’s (1965) *Five Stages of Group Development*, which include “forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning” (p. 1). Conceptualizing change using Tuckman’s five stages of group development is common for leaders when they are going through the process of leading a new group of teachers.

When Henry reflected on how many years it takes a principal leader to successfully make significant improvements in a school community, he stated:

*I think that in the old literature that he [Fullan] wrote—I remember reading the book before all of this verbiage and legislation came about—I think it said about 5–8 years.*
But once there was a cultural change or making changes quicker and having impact quicker all of a sudden the . . . literature changed and it was under 5 years. You know I can base what I think on the literature. I think you need at least, you have to make jumps, but I think you need about 5 years. I think that 3 is a little intense.

In discussing the 3-year requirement for principals to be removed according to RTTT policy, Henry suggested he could find no research on the requirement of the 3-year stipulation and said: “The authors of the Race to the Top stipulations in my personal opinion about it is that it is arbitrary. I didn’t see [the] kind of research that was consistent to back that up.” He noted that high-need schools also need staying power, a positive climate, community collaboration among staff and students, and formative assessments. He observed, “It is hard to put a number on how long that takes to build that up, and then to get into the deep work to figure out what deep collaboration looks like.” He posed the question: “What does it look like when we are wholly vulnerable, working together, and trusting each other?” According to Henry, for someone to come in and make that happen in 3 years is really a “miracle” and dependent upon who the new principal’s predecessor was and what style that individual had. It takes a while for a staff to adjust to a new principal, which in itself might take at least a year.

RTTT Policy’s Lack of Alignment With Good Practice in Schools

Another subtheme that emerged in the data was that that participants did not believe, based on their observations and on the high turnover among principals who replaced them, that RTTT policy aligned with good practices in schools. Good school practice, according to the principals interviewed, requires multiple elements, such as trust, relationships, vision, systems, long-term investments, and support for students who generate the highest need within a school
Excerpts from James and Daniel illustrate RTTT policy’s lack of alignment with good practice in schools.

James recalls being very supportive of the whole RTTT process; at the time he believed that a SIG grant would be best for students. Therefore, it was easy for James to try to support the process in the beginning. This is what James said regarding his school’s demographics, data, and the need for differentiated support he had been requesting for his middle school:

*Luck would have it that it was one of the most challenging schools in the district, state, probably the United States. For years we showed spikes of improvement; it went up and down. For years I asked for differentiated instruction and was told “That’s not how we do things in our district.” . . . So being in a school that had students that generated the highest need, but did not receive any differentiated support, I did the best I could. And for 9 years I felt, and so did my staff, that things were going in a good direction, because our goal was always to help kids grow, it wasn’t to help kids meet a benchmark.*

Daniel noted the challenge of obtaining long-term effects with short-term grants and had this to say regarding RTTT policy:

*I’ve got to say that I don’t think those models are effective without support. And, I think just trying to churn . . . . To me it feels like churning. Hey look we can show that we’re doing something, but there’s no long-term research to show that these models are effective. I think people are able to use the money that already have systems in place and trust with their staff, but if they don’t, it doesn’t work. And so I think long-term, I think we’ve got to revisit the whole system, including AYP, which is ridiculous (laughter). But the problem is . . . our Congress is kind of at a standstill, and we’ve got to make the best*
of what we have, but I don’t think the policy is correct. I think the success of this has
nothing to do with firing the principal, I think it’s having the right leadership team that
has a nice vision that people can connect to and relational trust with the staff, and then
developing the systems with the money to support the students.

According to the principals interviewed in this study, effective school practices require
long-term funding and research-based models that effectively address the challenges of high-
need, low-performing schools and communities.

**RTTT SIG Grants’ Failure to Demonstrate Notable Benefits to Students**

Most of the principals reported that RTTT SIG grants did not result in significant benefits
to students and student achievement, which is another subtheme that emerged from the data.
Most of the schools that received SIG grants also experienced high turnover of principal
leadership during the 4 years that followed. The focus for these SIG schools became increasing
students’ test scores to move out of AYP status or to increase graduation rates. For example,
even though the principal who replaced Daniel already knew the staff and had a fairly smooth
transition into the school, Daniel noted, “Unfortunately, we haven’t had a huge growth [in
student scores] . . . and I mean EVERY kid is in a COE [Collection of Evidence] class. Every
teacher has been trained.” Laurie’s previous school also experienced high turnover and lack of
student growth. She had this to say:

> What are we, 4 years later and now they’ve been identified as a RAD school . . . there’s
been two other principals there [since I was a principal there], and now there’s a third.
So there’s been a lot of turnover and a real lack of academic progress. I mean in fact the
math scores have continued to get less and less and so there’s been a lot of money put in there with not a lot of results.

Henry stated this about the challenges and student growth:

_We were 85% [free and reduced lunch] and the other school was higher than ours. So tons of intense poverty and intense mobility . . . I’m generalizing huge here, but we’ve got kids [who are in their seventh school by the seventh grade] and no wonder they are struggling. The huge flaw is when talking about growth and how student growth was measured . . . our kids did well when they were with us. It was a head scratcher to us. As a kid comes to seventh grade and reading at a third grade level and they leave us reading almost at grade level . . . they made 3 or 4 years’ growth in 2 years. It isn’t about blaming the elementary schools either. I’m glad we are having a better conversation about growth now. It’s too bad we didn’t have that same discussion back when SIG was there._

Reestablishing relationships, trust, and a belief in the leader’s vision takes valuable time. James expressed the belief that the district could have done more by keeping him in that school than they did by replacing him and that keeping him would have resulted in more significant benefits to students in a timelier manner.

**Competitive Funding of Education is a Flawed Approach**

The negative effects of offering funding for education on a competitive basis and the difficulty of sustaining systemic changes in the context of high principal turnover emerged as a subtheme in the data. Reassigned principals indicated that in some instances, their previous schools had already had more than one new principal since their reassignment. Finding principal
and teacher candidates for persistently low-achieving schools proved to be challenging for most districts. Some of the low-performing schools had transitioned from SIG to RAD schools, which started the process over for those schools. Adding to the funding challenge, in 2014, Washington State was the first state to lose the NCLB waiver from the federal government and then reverted back to the regulations of NCLB, meaning that if schools failed to meet their AYP goals, they were subject to the progressive consequences of NCLB. The state waiver was pulled because the state failed to include teacher evaluations of student performance (Bidwell, 2014). This challenge created more schools that were identified on the lowest-performing lists in the state.

Illustrating the competitive funding challenge, Laurie observed:

> It’s harder than ever, at least in our area, we don’t have teacher candidates. I mean people are not going into teaching. This rhetoric has come out and all of the funding hasn’t come forward. Young people are not going into the profession and it’s really a concern. You know these turnaround schools, I don’t know. Are we just going to keep churning and churning instead of financing some real powerful professional development for people and making them better? You know there’s not a huge group out there that are going to be better than what we have.

Laurie said this about SIG grants coming to an end after 3 years:

> So when the money’s gone . . . It is going to impact staffing, but it won’t necessarily impact the programs; principals have been really thoughtful about providing a sustainable model so that has been our conversation the entire year. We have a new deputy superintendent and myself and then the superintendent—we’re just working toward that sustainable model so there won’t be any surprises. There will be some staff
that have to be displaced and we’ll just go forward, we’ve learned a lot, we know what’s worked. Yeah, we’ll be fine. You know the money was nice though. The money allowed them to do things that had never been done before and has allowed schools to be more equitable.

Regarding SIG and RAD monies and the challenge of getting off the turnaround cycle, James said:

I know that they picked a different principal at the other school and they received SIG monies. They made some changes to the school day and the collaboration time for teachers and for planning and things of that nature. And, I know in the end the scores after 3 years do not look any different. Then 4 years later that principal was moved and now they’re a RAD school and they’re going through the whole thing again. I think the expectations are a little different and the support continues to be very differentiated for that school. I think they’ve experienced a lot of turnover in that school as a result of all these SIG monies and RAD monies that are coming into it.

Regarding the system of competitive funding for education, Henry asserted:

It is flawed. What it did for the group is that it kicked things in gear, it increases urgency, but I think there are other things. It is too formulaic and too cookie cutter; there are too many things about it that are flawed. There are positive things that happen in the school, because of the people who are in the school. But there can be some schools that got the money, and [didn’t achieve] any deeper achievement or gains.

The principals in this study reported that funding education through competition for grants posed challenges. Principals noted that the people who are inside the schools make the
difference. Principals referenced negative effects on schools that had high principal and teacher turnover. Additionally, when the grants inevitably came to an end, there was a reduction in staffing, which posed challenges regarding the sustainability of systemic changes.

**Political Action and Principal “Voice” in Education Policy Is Critical**

Another subtheme that emerged in the data analysis was the importance of political action and principal “voice.” James spoke of the importance of principal “voice.” He stated his belief that principal “voices’” were heard “very rarely.” James had good relationships with his former staff, and he felt he could have done much more with the more than $3 million than the principal that replaced him was able to do. His former assistant principal replaced the principal who replaced James. The school had two new principals in 4 years. James offered these professional insights regarding his “voice” prior to RTTT and his reassignment:

*I think that the decisions that they made [were] based on somebody that isn’t as intimate with education as you and I are. They’re wrong decisions, and I think what they should have done was asked districts: “Are these principals intelligent, are they capable, are they hard workers, are they people that you continue to support?” And if the district said “Yes,” then they should have invited us to the table and said, “Brainstorm with us.” Asked us about “How we can help you with your school,” because you and I would have both given them a lot of different things they could have done, and you and I, if you’re like me, we were trying to do that even prior to this legislation coming down and my district kept saying “Muzzle it James, we don’t want to hear it. James, you’re making yourself look bad, it’s not looking good for you.” And you know what, I wish I would have been a little bit louder. I wish I would have continued what I was doing and*
continued to ask for that support that was different than the other three schools. They’re so critical in my district, and they said, “If the other schools don’t get it James, then you’re not getting it.” And I kept telling them why I should get it and they kept telling me, “Enough with that kind of talk.”

Henry expressed that when it came to RTTT policy and principal “voice,” “in that case [RTTT] there was none. Except you know I’m not sure what principal said, ‘That’s a great idea.’” Laurie expressed the following regarding her “voice” as a result of being reassigned: “I do trust my leadership voice and so for that I’m very thankful.” Laurie pointed out the importance of her own leadership “voice” and of the “voices” of leaders in general. Regarding the “voices” of leaders, Laurie said:

And so if the system itself isn’t working well, and not being responsive to the needs of the leaders and their voices, and [the Department of Education] is putting their money where their mouth is in terms of professional development, autonomy for teachers, and a whole variety of things . . . I think it’s easy for systems to think the answer lies outside of them and I think what you would see in [her district], is that answer was within them for one school and really unfortunately for [her previous school]. I wouldn’t even be able to tell you or even know the climate and culture of that school because it’s just been in constant flux. Which affects students.

Absent principal “voice,” decisions are made that may not be in the best interest of students, staff, and the local community. Annie shared the following thoughts regarding the effects on educational policy of the absence of principal “voice”:
I think there are a lot of things you need to consider when you are looking at a school that isn’t making adequate progress. And I don’t think it is always the principal’s fault. But this is the way this whole policy has turned out, and so, if I was a policy maker, I would ask the principal: “What options do we need to give you? What options do you need to make your school successful?” before we come in and say, “You are the problem. You’re out first.”

Not having principal “voice” at the table of education policy making did not make sense to the principal participants in this study. These reassigned principals expressed disbelief that RTTT policy did not take into consideration the local context or specific situations of each of their schools. The principals found the “one size fits all” approach to be harmful and ineffective.

Six Stages of the Sensemaking Journey

In the data analysis, sensemaking emerged as a major theme in principal reassignment. Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework was used as a sensitizing tool in analyzing the participant interviews. These six stages emerged from the data analysis: (a) self-perception prior to reassignment; (b) response to notification of RTTT reassignment; (c) announcement to staff, students, and community; (d) new assignment and responding to others reactions to reassignment; (e) retrospective reflections on personnel-targeted policies; and (f) reflection and rebuilding confidence. For each of the principals, sensemaking was a process that took days, months, and years. For the principals in this study, the process of sensemaking was continuous and ongoing, and quite possibly may never be complete, given that each one will always be remembered as a reassigned principal. Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework was useful in understanding the process engaged by the principals, as indicated in the following sections.
Self-Perception Prior to Reassignment

Prior to reassignment, principal participant self-perceptions were determined largely through the participants’ prior successes in their careers of leading schools. Participants described themselves as confident, capable, successful leaders prior to the implementation of RTTT policy, and they were genuinely surprised to find themselves in a reassignment situation. Self-identities were grounded in those successes and in their interpretations of their interactions with their supervisors, evaluators, and colleagues. To illustrate participant self-perceptions, James said this regarding his performance evaluations prior to reassignment: “I was an administrator who was a shining star in the district, who had nothing but excellent evaluations, and I had been in place as a principal for 9 years.” Daniel offered his evaluation experience prior to his reassignment:

The bottom line is we get evaluated by our superintendents; if we’re not getting it done, they need to remove us, just like if we have a teacher that’s not getting it done and we’ve got to remove the teacher. And I had great evaluations from my superintendent, who thought, I think honestly thought I was doing a good job, and yes I was young in my administration career as a principal, but we were moving in the right direction and that I was committed and invested in the work, and so that’s kind of hard too; it [RTTT policy] takes that evaluation piece completely out of the hands of the district.

Self-perceptions are similar to identity construction in Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model, in which humans create their identities through the process of interacting with others. The interpretation of self was an important aspect of the sensemaking journey each participant described in his or her interview.
Response to Notification of RTTT Reassignment

According to all of the principals, notification of reassignment created a situation of “thrownness,” which was followed by the grief and loss stage of denial, in which each principal began examining the data and possible ways to correct errors to avoid reassignment. Daniel shared these sensemaking thoughts about the notification of his reassignment:

I was just devastated. . . . Well I was embarrassed for one to be on the list, because I knew we were better than that . . . and I knew that we were making gains . . . we were getting systems up and running so that they could catch up . . . But it was devastating. . . . And for me personally . . . you know it’s tough . . . When you’re the leader . . . [And there is] the uncertainty of “What’s going to happen to me?”

Marie learned about her reassignment via a telephone call from the superintendent. Later she learned that others in the district who were also to be reassigned did not receive a call but instead heard about their reassignment through the grapevine. Marie had been leading her middle school for 10 years. Her personal support throughout the reassignment process came from her school improvement coordinator.

Emotionally [it] was really tough for me to hear that this could be my last year. Having kind of put that into my mindset and thinking that I was going to be gone. I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m going to be gone. They said I had a choice where I wanted to go. I don’t really think that was an option. I didn’t mind going to [her high school assistant principal assignment] because I had taught there, and done my internship there. What really upset me more, was that they . . . [called] me out of the blue [and said] “Well, your scores were really good, and you are not in the bottom five anymore and now
you can stay another year.” It was too draining for me all year to know I was going.

What happens next year if my scores aren’t good? This is not a stable place to be. They
didn’t have the confidence to say, “Here is our plan. We are going to give you 3 or 4 years and see how it goes.”

Marie offered these additional sensemaking statements regarding her reassignment experience:

It took me a while to be able to talk about it. No one should have to go through what I had to go through. No one should have to feel less worthy and less than human at one point. It took me a few years, maybe 2 years tops, to start to think that I have some good ideas.

James indicated that for him, the implementation of RTTT policies was an experience of being measured by rubrics that were unrealistic. James noted that schools “experience spikes in data frequently” and that this is not necessarily a reflection on the principal. James noted that the three principals from his district “ended up without question talking to one another and kind of venting and consoling and being there for each other as we went through this, what we would call this very difficult time in our careers.” The connection for the reassigned principals presented itself because of what was happening to them at the time. James reconnected with the group to introduce me and my research study to them, and he encouraged each of them to participate in this study. In retelling his story, James offered the following about his sensemaking process and the costs that he associated with his reassignment:

I didn’t all of a sudden become “bad.” I mean it didn’t take them 9 years to find out how “bad” I was. In fact there was no talk about me being “bad” prior to the (RTTT) and the
SIG monies. And nobody said that even then, but I’ll tell you what, that’s how you and I felt. And if you didn’t feel that way then you’re different than me.

When asked what he had experienced emotionally, personally, and professionally since his reassignment, James replied:

*I think it’s been a big hit to my ego. It’s been a big hit to my professional status, in terms of perceptions that others have . . . others that don’t understand it . . . they don’t know exactly what’s going on but all they see is principal being demoted . . . principal is not getting the job done . . . principal wasn’t the right person for the school . . . and in my opinion, and you know this better than most, that’s not even close to the truth, that’s not what happened at all.*

In the second interview, James revisited both how RTTT affected him emotionally and the perceptions that he believed others continued to have about his reassignment:

*My ego was saying, “I messed up, I didn’t get the job done, I wasn’t right for the position,” and when you get moved, unless you are the one asking for the move, or requesting the move, it’s usually not good in any district. And that was the perception and perception is reality. The way people looked at me, the way people treated me, the way I felt all changed. It’s been 4 years, almost 5, I still feel it. I’m still an assistant, I’m not a principal again. This administration, for whatever reason, I believe has lost confidence in my abilities and consequently, I’ve stayed where I’m at . . . it’s a frustration, but you know what, because they left my title and salary alone, I’m a principal on special assignment and my salary stayed the same, my contract day stayed the same, I’m not going to rock any boat.*
Most of the principals interviewed reported that an element of secrecy was expected by their central office staff or superintendents from the time they were notified to the time an announcement was made to their staff. Most were told, “Don’t tell anyone.” Marie shared these sensemaking thoughts about her instructions to keep her reassignment a secret: “It was really rough my last few months there and I couldn’t tell anybody. It was also very rough; both of my assistant principals left so I had to hire two new ones. So it was at times very lonely.” This dynamic left the reassigned principals isolated in a very vulnerable and isolating period during the reassignment experience and was one of many unpleasant parts of the sensemaking journey. Marie stated, “There will always be residual feeling(s) of anger and resentment; I made it through to the “other side” by focusing on the staff and students.”

Principals’ experiences of being notified that they had been reassigned were similar to Weick’s (1995) continuation-ongoing characteristic of the sensemaking model, as reassigned principals found themselves in situations of “thrownness,” which were followed by emotions. Weick’s (1995) characteristic of enactment in the sensemaking model was similar to the way participants framed and interpreted their reassignments. The characteristic of extracted cues from Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model was similar to the participants’ experience of the phenomenon of reassignment and how they interpreted their experiences following reassignment.

Announcements to Staff, Students, and Community

Multiple subthemes in the sensemaking journey in relation to staff, students, and the community emerged in the data. After principals received the initial notification, the arduous task of announcing RTTT policy decisions first to the staff and then students was unavoidable. Depending on the RTTT model chosen, the effects were primarily just for the principal;
however, in two of the participants’ situations, the decision also affected staff and students. In the instance of school closure, everyone in the entire school was displaced, and in the instance of turnaround, at least 50% of the staff members were also faced with the need to reapply and to interview for positions in the district. Consequently, this stage of sensemaking found many staff and students experiencing “thrownness.”

Daniel described many of his staff as crying when he told them what the situation was at the next staff meeting (at the time he did not know his own fate) and that the district would be applying for a School Improvement Grant (SIG). At the time he also didn’t know that in his new role he would be co-authoring the grant and sitting on the principal interview team that would eventually replace him as principal. He reflected on his attempt to point out all the great work the staff had accomplished and how proud he was of them, but he referred to the legislation that prompted his removal as a bunch of “churn” that did not take into account the situation each one of these principals found him or herself in while actually doing good and difficult work in the highest-poverty zip code schools in the state.

Participants described facing frequent questions from all parts of the community within and outside of the school system because the majority of others did not know or understand the requirements of RTTT policy or the reason for the reassignment. Henry reported on the conflicting emotions resulting from his supervisors trying to build his morale, students asking him questions he could not answer, and then his district putting information about his new placement on the website, which resulted in these sensemaking thoughts:

*It was weird for me since I don’t like the attention. Kids would come up to me because it got on the website and they would ask me every day about it. It was touching but*
overwhelming. I don’t even like birthday parties for myself, but I tried to act gracious because it was very heartfelt. They had [a recognition] . . . for me and that was nice too. It was a long period in your school year because you are on your way out, and it was a more intense period where I . . . when it came down to it no one could guarantee that I’d have a job in the district. They were all expressing confidence in me. Bottom line was that no one could tell me that in 7 to 8 weeks that I was going to have a job. It was very stressful.

Having become a superintendent, Laurie had a different perspective on the impact of RTTT policy on districts and communities. Specifically, she noted these sensemaking sentiments regarding local community control over education decisions:

So if you come in and you’re an average student, and you leave and you’re still an average student then your growth is nominal and that’s a concern, that’s a huge concern. I think as our targets move, the research that I’ve seen on turnaround schools, unless there’s huge issues, that needs to be local decision making and not tied to some Department of Education formulaic decision making. I really believe that the school boards make decisions, and the superintendents carry those out, you know the mission and vision and goals . . . because I’m accountable to taxpayers in my area. You know we are even looking at, “Is it even worth the money that we get, we get $150,000 for Title money for our three elementary schools, which doesn’t even equate to two people, and so, is it worth the money for the public ill will or frustration and the label?” You know that’s a huge question. We’ve kind of danced around a lot of stuff, but . . .
In most cases, the reasons for reassignment were not communicated effectively by superintendents or district personnel; therefore, rumors and assumptions regarding reassignment were left to staff, students, and the community. This fact made the sensemaking journey even more difficult for the reassigned principals. Weick’s (1995) socialization and retrospection characteristics from the sensemaking model were similar to this stage of reassignment, as participants began to have social interactions that became uncomfortable in relation to their reassignment and began analyzing the meaning of their reassignment in relation to their future.

**New Assignment and Responding to Others’ Reactions to Reassignment**

Participants described having frequent questions regarding their reassignments and the experience of the situation of “thrownness” throughout the process of reassignment. The reactions of others to their reassignments were similar to the characteristic of socialization interactions of the sensemaking model. The essence of what James experienced was captured in what he said about moving into his new position. Staff did not think they were getting a “jewel,” they thought they were getting a “piece of coal,” and he had to prove that he was different. James stated: “I mean it’s just not a good way to start and that’s the way it was for all principals that got removed.” He felt that it was unfair for the reassigned principals to be placed in positions where people had little or no confidence in their ability to lead.

A change in superintendents after James’s reassignment resulted in the new superintendent’s not knowing James and therefore not believing in his ability to lead. All the new superintendent knew, according to James, was that he “got moved.” James explained:

*I’m working harder than I’ve ever worked, but as an assistant. I’m going to wait till these guys realize that they had a diamond out there that they removed. And, when*
they’re ready to call me back up, then I’m ready to go, but until then I’m content . . .

[Although] I’m angry somewhat still.

Marie said she continued to field questions regarding her reassignment to an assistant principal role at the high school:

*But at the same time they want to know why did I come to [new assignment]? Why did I leave being a middle school principal? That is a question I get all the time and it is hard to answer. It never really goes away. But the benefit I guess is I like what I do here. I can’t say that I’m happy, but I’m not like “I have to leave,” and I don’t feel like “I hate my job and I need to leave here.” I feel like I need to go do something and be somewhere different. And my husband and I argue all the time. He feels like the district was really unprofessional. So we argue with that.*

Principal reassignments took a toll on principals’ personal health, relationships, self-confidence, careers, and their self-image in terms of the perceptions of others regarding the reason for their reassignment. The sensemaking journey, therefore, has been a very complicated journey that continues to evolve. The participants’ transitions into their new assignments were similar to the continuation-ongoing and plausibility characteristics in Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model: As a result of the experience of “thrownness,” the participants began to create a workable map of their career situation. This effort led to a reasonable, credible, and plausible story of their reassignment, which gave the participants a sense of order.

**Retrospective Reflections on Personnel-Targeted Policies**

The sensemaking journey for each of the reassigned principals included a heightened awareness of RTTT policy and of education policy in general. Principals expressed dismay
because neither their voices nor their school’s individual context were considered in RTTT policy at the federal level. When asked whether they had changed their approach to state legislation and state legislators, Laurie replied:

Absolutely, absolutely, all of it actually. I met with Senator [from her district] last week and we were talking about some of the very things around funding and about opportunities. Now being in a rural community I’ve learned many more things of inequities being in a small compared to a large urban school district. It’s just really interesting, because if we don’t inform our legislators then who will do that, who will they listen to? They want to be good stewards, they do, but if they don’t have relationships then they don’t know who to believe.

Consequently, the participants have become more politically active, even meeting with senators and legislators, traveling to Olympia and the state capital to be heard on behalf of themselves, their schools, their districts, and state organizations. Weick’s (1995) sensemaking characteristic of retrospection is similar to the policy awareness process principals experienced as a result of their reassignment, as participants realized the importance of their role in federal and state policy processes.

Reflection and Rebuilding Confidence

Four years after reassignment, the participants were rebuilding their confidence in their new roles. As a result, their self-perception and sense of identity were progressively being reconstructed through their successful leadership and interactions with their supervisors, staff, and students. For some of the participants, this process of rebuilding confidence was analogous to the story of the phoenix rising up from the ashes, which is well documented in their own
words. Prior to reassignment, Daniel was the principal of a single comprehensive high school in a small community district that included an alternative high school. Daniel applied for and was awarded a central office position, and in reflection stated:

> And, luckily, I think I told you this, but like 2 months later our assistant superintendent resigned . . . and I applied for that position . . . and I ended up winning that job. So I landed on my feet and had I not gotten that job I think they would have gotten a different job for me, but I was glad that I was able to win that. . . . To at least feel somewhat validated.

Marie offered these sensemaking thoughts about her ability to apply for new positions following her reassignment:

> Professionally I think I mentioned that it took a while, that I couldn’t even apply for another job. It’s taken me a while to do a . . . to do a principal again. [Her principal colleague] told me to do it, but I’m not sure if I am up to that task anymore. I like my work here in [new school as an assistant principal]. I have a good principal and we get along very well. Between [assistant principal colleague] and I [sic] we really run the school. I feel like I am needed here. It has taken me a while to know that I can I think after this year I might choose to move on from here. I felt like a connection with them . . . I have the skills. I know what I am doing.

In summary, using Weick’s (1995) seven characteristics of sensemaking, principal participants worked through interpreting and framing their reassignment through the use of cues, extracted during the phenomenon of being reassigned, that were crucial in assisting principals in finding a new balance after reassignment. Socialization was experienced differently by each
participant; for example, those principals who were one of a few in a district relied heavily on each other through the days and weeks after learning about their reassignments. On the other hand, the participants who were the only ones reassigned in their district experienced feelings of isolation and lacked social structures for support. Reassignments began during a continuation-ongoing phase of everyday life when principals found themselves in what could be described as “thrownness.” Situations of “thrownness” are interruptions signaling that changes are occurring, which can be minor or major. Emotions are linked with sensemaking, parallel the interruption, and are recalled when reflected upon. Plausibility evolved in the story created through the reassignment experience and assisted principals with creating a logical map that redefined their identity construction. Each principal’s situation was progressively clarified over time through the sequence of order, interruption, and then recovery, while the principal experienced emotional, personal, and professional upheaval.

**Summary**

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that reassigning principals in low-performing schools caused significant personal, professional, and emotional costs to the principals, and in some cases financial costs to individual principals in the form of salary reductions. This study also found that reassignment was psychologically demoralizing and harmful for some of the principals and that individual principal sensemaking took months and years to process. This study also found that school communities suffered as a result of RTTT policy. In the case of the district that had undergone a strike, the costs affected teachers, students, their parents, and the community. In the case of school closure, significant costs were
incurred. The study found the principal participants went through a grief and loss process and related their reassignment to the experience of dealing with a “death.”

This study found that RTTT policy resulted in multiple unintended consequences. One of the unintended consequences was that the RTTT policy requirement of allowing no more than 3 years for a principal to turn around a school was not consistent with research or good practice and was therefore targeted toward personnel. Principals were a casualty of RTTT requirements and bore the brunt of the costs as a result of implementation of SIG grants because the principals had served for more than 3 years in each of their schools. Participants believed this personnel-targeted policy approach to be ineffective and not grounded in research. Another finding was that RTTT SIG grants did not result in significant benefits to students. The study also found that having schools compete for funding for education is a flawed approach that results in inequitable federal resources for schools. Additionally, principal “voice” was found to be both critical in the formation of education policy and absent from the development of RTTT policy.

The study found that the participants experienced a sensemaking journey as a result of RTTT policy implementation that included these stages: notification of RTTT reassignment requirement, the emotional response and loss of self-confidence, the announcements to staff and students, staff and student reaction and in some cases community mourning, principal new assignment and responding to others’ reactions to the reassignment, a policy awareness and action phase, and reflection and rebuilding confidence and finding “voice” again. Verbalizing the reassignment experiences in some cases was a “purging” of the entire sensemaking journey for the principals, and the interviews gave many of them their first opportunity to answer questions about what the experience was like from their perspective. The sensemaking journey
for the participants has taken months and years to process and was described by Annie this way:

“To me personally, I’m not sure I’ll ever get over this.” Final conclusions of the study and implications for policy, practice, and research are presented in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the analysis presented in Chapter Four and a discussion of the implications for action and recommendations for further research. The purpose of this in-depth, qualitative interview study was to explore how K-12 public school principals in Washington State “made sense” of the experience of reassignment under the provisions of Washington State’s version of the 2009 federal Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation. The major findings as presented in Chapter Four were organized into three themes: (a) costs of reassignment associated with RTTT policy implementation, (b) principal critique of this type of policy approach, and (c) the sensemaking journey of each principal impacted by reassignment. Weick’s (1995, 2005) concept of sensemaking and Rice and Malen’s (2003) human costs framework were used to guide the study and to analyze the qualitative interview data. In addition, Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) was useful in analyzing the data. The research questions that this study attempted to answer were: (a) How do principals describe what happened when they were reassigned? (b) How did principals work with staff, students, district, and community around the issue of being reassigned? (c) How did reassignment impact principals emotionally, personally, and professionally? (d) What are principals’ evaluations of this type of policy approach? and (e) What were the human costs/benefits associated with reassignment?

Conclusions of the Study

Based on the analysis presented in Chapter Four, the following four major conclusions can be stated: (a) RTTT is perceived by reassigned principals as a draconian approach with costs
outweighing the benefits; (b) RTTT policy’s requirements were perceived as unfair and left little choice for districts; (c) principal “voice” should be considered in designing and evaluating educational reforms; and, (d) the conceptual frames of human costs (Rice & Malen, 2003), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2005, & 2007), and Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) are useful in analyzing the experiences of individuals impacted by personnel-targeted policies. In the following section, each of the conclusions is discussed.

**RTTT Is Perceived by Reassigned Principals as a Draconian Approach with Costs**

**Outweighing Benefits**

This study found RTTT, as a personnel-targeted policy, was perceived as draconian and punitive in its effect on educators. All four RTTT turnaround models are aimed at personnel, and principals specifically became targets in all four models. In addition, teachers were specifically targeted in the RTTT turnaround model, in which at least 50% of the school staff had to be replaced, and in the RTTT school closure model, in which all of the staff were dismissed and had to reapply for their positions. According to Rice and Malen (2003), the stated aim of this type of education reform, “to enhance human capital,” (p. 465), may not come to fruition and this study found the RTTT turnaround model approach to be fundamentally problematic and inadequate.

Principals interviewed for this study were leading successful work in struggling schools before being reassigned, as noted by their supervisors and their performance evaluations. Therefore, removing the principal in order to apply for competitive SIG grants resulted in a disruption to the progress the school was experiencing. Ironically, in this study two of the six principals became co-authors and overseers of the SIG grants in their districts, which speaks to
their previous performance in leading these same schools. Furthermore, the “costs” of reassignment for participants were profound and long-lasting, with continued psychological pain associated with the experience. Reassigning caused significant personal, professional, and emotional costs to the principals in this study and, in some cases, financial costs to individual principals in the form of salary reductions. Further, according to participants in this study, there was little evidence of producing the significant results expected.

According to the participants, many of the schools experienced high turnover of principals and teachers after RTTT implementation, while consequently student test scores continued to go down in some of the schools, and those schools moved into RAD status within 2 to 4 years. In some cases, students believed that the school closure was their fault, and to make matters worse, they were not received well in their new schools by the teachers or fellow students. Although most of the reassigned principals who participated in this study had a new focus in their work and were moving forward, some principals mentioned parts of the experience that they would “never get over.” Thus, the human costs explored in this study were significant and appeared to outweigh the benefits.

**RTTT Policy’s Requirements Were Perceived as Unfair and Left Little Choice for Districts**

This study found RTTT policy’s requirements restrictive, leaving little choice for districts in desperate need of funding. In the reported experiences of the principals in this study, no consideration was made for the local context of each school in regard to the data point(s) or category(s) that identified their schools as being among the lowest-performing 5%. Sykes et al. (2009) recognized that a major theme common in education reform is the lack of effectiveness of
making funding for education dollars a competition among the highest-poverty and highest-need schools in America, a point reflected in this study’s findings.

The participants in the study viewed the personnel-targeted policies of RTTT as arbitrary and unfair. It was the experience of the participants that their successors were often recognized for the work and outcomes that had been accomplished by the reassigned principals while they were leading. Further, the newly appointed SIG principals had autonomy to hire and fire and had more resources, resources that the reassigned principals had been asking for but did not receive prior to RTTT policy implementation.

**Principal “Voice” Should Be Considered in Designing and Evaluating Educational Reform**

The Department of Education did not elicit principals’ input or “voice” as part of the development of RTTT policy legislation, and the voice of educators has been “muted” throughout the process of implementing the four turnaround models of RTTT (DeBray, 2005, Grubb & Flessa, 2006)). Thus, reform actions can come across as “arbitrary and ruthless,” (Rice & Malen, 2003, p. 654) especially when principals and teachers are removed for not meeting AYP, or for working in schools that are identified as being in the lowest-performing categories. This study demonstrated that principal voice has important contributions to make and should be considered in designing and evaluating education reform. In this study, principal voice provided important information about the context and history of educational efforts in the schools identified in the lowest 5% under RTTT; this type of contextual information should have played a part in decisions about policy implementation and reassignment. In addition, principal voice was critical in evaluating the impact of reassignment for both individuals and the schools they
serve. Therefore, the “voice” of principals is a necessary component of education reform and should be present in the development of federal and state education policy.

**Usefulness of Conceptual Frames**

The conceptual frames related to human costs (Rice & Malen, 2003), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2005, & 2007), and Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) were useful in analyzing the participants’ experiences. Rice and Malen’s (2003) human cost framework (which includes task, social, and psychological costs) was a useful organizational framework for examining the costs described by the participants. This study found examples of task costs; e.g., the tasks of co-authoring the SIG grants, and writing recommendation letters for assistant principals who eventually replaced the reassigned principals, as well as social costs and psychological costs. Costs also included costs to teachers, to students and parents, and to school districts and communities.

The sensemaking framework of Weick (1995), specifically the seven characteristics of sensemaking and the notion of story development in making sense of RTTT implementation, was useful in analyzing the experiences of the participants. Principal reassignments began during a continuation-ongoing phase of everyday life when principals found themselves in what could be described as “thrownness.” Situations of “thrownness” are interruptions signaling that changes are occurring, which can be minor or major. In the case of principal reassignment, “thrownness” was perceived to be a major career interruption. Sensemaking of the situation of “thrownness” was a process for each of the principals that took days, months, and years. Prior to reassignment, principal participant sensemaking characteristic of identity construction was largely determined through the principals’ prior success in their career of leading schools. Principal self-identities
were grounded in those successes and in their interpretations of their interactions with their supervisors, evaluators, and colleagues. Principal participants worked through interpreting and framing their reassignment using cues, extracted during the phenomenon of being reassigned, that were crucial in assisting principals in finding a new balance after reassignment.

Socialization occurred differently for each participant; for example, principals who were one of a few in a district relied heavily on each other through the days and weeks after learning about their reassignment. On the other hand, participants who were the only ones reassigned in their district experienced feelings of isolation and lacked social structures for support. In navigating the sensemaking map (story) of their sensemaking journey, all participants reported experiencing emotional, personal, and professional upheaval. The sensemaking process requires considerable emotional and physical energy.

This study found the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969), which is related to the emotions of “death- and dying-related grief” and to the emotional stages of “denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance” (p. 905) to be useful in understanding the emotional process of the principal reassignment experience. This study found that reassigned principals had to make sense of their reassignment experience in a process that was similar to the five stages of grief and loss. The study found that principals went through a grief and loss process and related their reassignment to the experience of dealing with a “death.” Kearney (2013) linked the framework of sensemaking to the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969). Kearney’s study researched the emotions of grief and loss and sensemaking that arose during a leadership change. As Axelrod (2014) noted about the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct: “We spend different lengths of time working through each step and express each stage with different levels
of intensity, and the five stages do not necessarily occur in any specific order” (p. 1), which was found to be the case for each individual principal in this study as well. Job loss is commonly linked to grief and loss, which is how participants interpreted their reassignments in this study.

Implications and Recommendation of the Study

Implications of the conclusions of the study for policy, practice, and research are considered in this section. To review, the following four major conclusions can be stated:

(a) RTTT is perceived by reassigned principals as a Draconian approach with costs outweighing the benefits; (b) RTTT policy’s requirements were perceived as unfair and left little choice for districts; (c) principal “voice” should be considered in designing and evaluating educational reforms; and (d) the conceptual frames of human costs (Rice & Malen, 2003), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2005, & 2007), and Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) are useful in analyzing the experiences of individuals impacted by personnel-targeted policies.

Implications of Conclusion 1: RTTT Is Perceived by Reassigned Principals as a Draconian Approach With Costs Outweighing Benefits

In regard to policy, this study found RTTT’s Draconian approach to education reform to be potentially ineffective and harmful. Therefore, this approach to education reform should be reconsidered by policy makers in light of the serious costs involved. Sykes et al. (2009) stated:

Reconstitution assumes that the school’s stock of human capital is the critical ingredient in school improvement and that enhancing the stock of human capital in low-performing schools is accomplished better through sweeping replacement of personnel rather than through targeted development of personnel. (p. 464)
However, this study suggests that the “costs” of such reform outweigh the benefits; policymakers must become knowledgeable about these costs. Further, this study suggests that reform policies need to consider the local context, including local school challenges that exist for districts, principals, teachers, and students. This study suggests that local authority must be recognized as a vital element in district decision making and implementation of federal policy.

In regard to practice, it appears that reconstitution can weaken the capacity for school improvement and undercut commitment to the organization. Long-term collateral damage to individuals and to school communities were found in this study. The implications for practice include school district consideration of steps to avoid the damaging consequences of reconstitution, including extensive measures to communicate with all district stakeholders and possibly the consideration of district legal challenges to damaging elements of prescribed policy implementation.

In regard to research, more research is needed on the impact of RTTT, in particular, exploring whether school performance changes after implementation of a RTTT mandated turnaround model. This study also suggests that policy makers and legislators must sponsor research on “personnel-targeted” education reform and its effects on schools.

**Implications of Conclusion 2: RTTT Policy’s Requirements Were Perceived as Unfair and Left Little Choice for Districts**

In regard to policy, policy makers at the federal level might carefully reexamine this type of competitive funding and take into consideration the effects of this type of policy, which were perceived by these participants as ineffective and damaging. The “theory regarding how incentives and capacity interact to affect organizational performance in general and school
performance in particular is underdeveloped,” according to Sykes et al. (2009, p. 465). In this study, reassigned principals perceived the requirements as restrictive, impractical, and resulting in more turmoil than long-term gains. Further, while it is too early to determine, early results of RTTT policy are not altogether promising, and based on past reconstitution results, a prediction of similar unimpressive outcomes would not be unreasonable. The schools identified in this study were located in some of the highest-poverty zip codes in the state. Districts in considerable need of resources were faced with difficult decisions regarding RTTT models and requirements of reassigning principals and in some districts dismissing teachers. Schools in high poverty areas need adequate and often enhanced fiscal resources without having to compete for their funding. This study calls for action from the federal and state governments to adequately and equitably fund school reform that considers local school contexts and specific unique challenges faced in high-poverty communities.

In regard to practice, school districts must develop awareness and strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of the implementation of restrictive requirements. Sykes et al. (2009) noted:

In schools that responded to the threats, principals became more directive, rigid, and controlling in their interactions with teachers, which strained relationships and pressured teachers to conform to questionable practices, and failed to translate into stronger programs and more equitable learning outcomes. Additionally, teachers focused on short-term, superficial, and arguably detrimental strategies that may get them off probation, but do little for the long-term substantive changes to ultimately assist with academic improvements for all students. (p. 486)
The implications for practice are complex, as they call for districts to be fully aware of these potentially negative impacts on teaching and learning and to stay the course with evidence-based effective practices.

In regard to research, this conclusion suggests that policy makers should use researched, evidence-based practices in their development of policy and verify whether the sanctions and rewards approach causes more damage than repair. Very little research has been conducted on the inequities involved in sanction-heavy policies and whether high-poverty schools actually benefit from these competitive approaches. In addition, more research is needed on the practical challenges of implementation of education polices.

**Implications of Conclusion 3: Principal “Voice” Should Be Considered in Designing and Evaluating Educational Reform**

In regard to policy, this study suggests educational policymakers should consider local school context and principal “voice” in designing and implementing school reform policies. Influencing federal education policy makers continues to be a challenge for principals, who are significantly underrepresented in the Department of Education. This study suggests the voices of practitioner principals should be heard as a standard practice of education policy development and that educators have a responsibility to be active in policy matters. The promise that principal “voice” would be included at the education policy table was made by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2013. This promise should be fulfilled.

In regard to practice, this study suggests that at the school district level, principals should have a voice in their reassignment, with consideration for principals who have been successfully leading their schools prior to reassignment. Principals impacted by reassignment should not
have to also deal with a negative impact on their salaries. Additionally, this study suggests leaders should use transparent communication regarding reassignments and exhibit sensitivity to people being impacted. In practice, this study also suggests that school districts should take a stand against education policies like RTTT and the negative costs and consequences related to such policies.

In regard to research, this study suggests that further research that includes principal voice in evaluating reform policies is critically needed. Practitioners have a wealth of knowledge that should not be ignored.

Implications of Conclusion 4: Usefulness of Conceptual Frames

The conceptual frames related to human costs (Rice & Malen, 2003), sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2005, & 2007), and Kübler-Ross’s Grief Construct (1969) were helpful in understanding the implications of reassignment. Rice and Malen’s (2003) human cost framework (which includes task, social, and psychological costs) was a useful organizational framework for examining the implications of the costs described by the participants. Through Weick’s (1995) characteristic of retrospection, principals were able to evaluate what they had experienced. This study suggests that sensemaking is one way to interpret principal reassignment and that over time, sensemaking assists individuals in assimilating major disruptions into plausible explanations. Lastly, since job loss is how participants interpreted their reassignments in this study, the Kübler-Ross Grief Construct (1969), which is related to the emotions of “death- and dying-related grief” and to the emotional stages of “denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance” (p. 905) was helpful in examining implications.
A practical implication is that educators impacted by personnel-targeted policies can be assisted in understanding their experiences by being provided with information and understandings related to these conceptual frames. Additionally, further research conducted on the impact of personnel-targeted policies would be helpful using these frameworks to further test their applicability.

**Reflections**

As one of the reassigned principals in Washington State, I found that my personal reflections were analogous to those of the participants in this study; therefore, the study validated my own experiences of reassignment. District representatives could have handled the implementation of RTTT policy and reassignments better in an effort to alleviate the trauma of the perceived demotions, which were counterproductive on several levels. I considered my reassignment a derailment of my career trajectory that undermined my self-confidence and left me feeling like an imposter in my administrative role, despite extensive evidence of my competence. To add insult to injury, the superintendent assured me that I would remain on the same salary schedule; however, when my contract came that summer, I found I had been placed on the middle school salary schedule. Like other female participants in this study, I challenged the salary placement without success.

The task of giving a voice to some of the principals and colleagues who experienced this displacement phenomenon seems to have fallen to me, within this single study. What I learned was that these participants were desperate to tell their stories, trusted me to represent their voices, had a desire for this study to make a difference, and led me to reassigned principals across the state of Washington who they knew would want to be part of this study.
Reassignment prompted me to become even more active in the legislative process and to apply for the Principal Ambassador Fellowship Program through the Department of Education (which was an extensive process), only to learn the disappointing results that out of more than 400 applicants, three charter school principals on the east coast were selected to represent our nation’s public and private schools.

Mia Nyman, one of my administrative certification instructors, with whom I had a great connection and who has influenced me throughout my administrative career, said, “You really have to know who you are to be an administrator.” This quote has resonated with me throughout my administrative career. At my core, I do really know who I am, what I believe and value, and what is truly important in my life. These factors have helped me in being resilient throughout what has been one of the most devastating and demoralizing experiences of my career. My role as a researcher in conducting this study contributed to my sensemaking journey and gave voice to the experience of principal reassignment on behalf of those who shared this experience with me.
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Interview Protocol

Research Questions

1. How do principals describe what happened when they were reassigned?
2. How did principals work with staff, students, district, and community around the issue of being reassigned?
3. How did reassignment impact principals emotionally, personally, and professionally?
4. What are principal’s evaluations of this type of policy approach?
5. What were the human costs/benefits associated with reassignment?

Interview Questions

1. Describe what happened in 2010 as a result of RTTT in your district.
2. Describe your experience of being notified you would be reassigned.
3. How did you work with staff, students, district, and community around the issue of being reassigned?
4. Describe what you experienced emotionally and personally during the transition to your reassignment.
5. How did your reassignment impact you professionally?
6. Looking back, how do you interpret this experience now?
7. What is your evaluation of this type of policy approach?
8. Is there anything else about the experience you would like to add?
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL PILOT STUDY
Interview Protocol Pilot Study

Research Questions for Implications of Race to the Top and SB 6696

1. How does a “one size fits all” set of Race to the Top turnaround models consider the range of principal leaders existing in schools?
2. How is Race to the Top policy and the four turnaround models for schools fundamentally problematic?
3. How do principals solve problems in schools for which they have some but not all district decision making authority?
4. What are the implications for a school and district when they are required to remove or reassign the principal of a school according to Race to the Top?
5. What are the “human costs” to principals reassigned or removed from leading a school that is identified by the Race to the Top policy?
6. How does Race to the Top justify the four turnaround models when research and practice highlight the importance of sustained leadership over time as an integral component of school improvement?

Interview Questions for Ed Ad 564 Qualitative Research SB 6696

1. Thinking back to January of 2010 when Race to the Top and House Bill 6696 became effective and the state’s lowest 5% list was published describe how you were notified your school was on the list?
2. Describe the category/data point(s) for which your school was identified and the districts response to the data.

3. Can you reconstruct the events in your district in the first few weeks following the list being published?

4. Describe the conversation(s) you had with your superintendent or your direct supervisor regarding the data and any decisions related to your position.

5. Were there any steps your superintendent took when your school was identified and if so what were they?

6. What were your thoughts regarding the data that was identified for your school?

7. What were your feelings personally after your school had been identified on the lowest 5% list?

8. What were your feelings professionally after your school had been identified on the lowest 5% list?

9. Describe what you experienced personally and professionally during the transition to your reassignment.

10. What steps did the district use to eradicate/fix the data after you were reassigned?

11. Following your reassignment, describe your overall feelings during the next year about your transition and new assignment.

12. Is there anything else about the experience you would like to add?