High School Principals in the Vortex:

Accountability, Autonomy, and Social Justice

by

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As schools across Arizona worked to meet NCLB’s AYP requirement in 2010-2011, they were also labeled and sanctioned by AZ Learns. This phenomenological study focused on six effective high school principals in two Arizona school districts to ascertain how accountability policies impacted the principals’ job responsibilities, autonomy, and ability to pursue social justice on their campuses. Interviews were conducted in three phases: superintendents, three principals from the superintendents’ recommendations of “effective” school leaders, and three teachers from each school. In addition to analysis of individual principal leadership patterns, comparisons were made across districts, and from school to school within the same district. The goal of the study was to determine if and how principals were able to accomplish their goals for their school. The principals’ leadership styles were examined through a Vortex Leadership Framework that posited principals at the center of a vortex of varying leadership roles, interests, and external forces, including accountability, autonomy, and limited resources. Key findings included (a) high school principals’ responsibilities now include selling change to their staff, (b) principals’ accountability is limited more by district constraints than by state or federal accountability, (c) principals must contend with rigid one-size fits all accountability standards that do not always meet the needs of their students, and (d) principals’ autonomy is tied to their resources, including funding for staffing and programs.
To public school principals and teachers
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I was in college to become a teacher, I often visited my father’s school, where he was a principal. A veteran middle school principal for over 15 years, he seemed to have super powers on his campus. He would stride confidently though the buildings with me, leaving behind us a wake of awe and respect. Teachers would step out of their classrooms to greet him, custodians would shake his hand and engage him in conversation, students would stampede to give him a high five screaming, “Dr. B! Dr. B!” and secretaries would swoon when we entered the office. Perhaps I only imagined the swooning, but there was definitely an aura about him, imbuing the members of the school community with a shared confidence, a palpable sense that they were in good hands.

But it wasn’t super powers that buoyed my dad through his school; he exhibited what I later gleaned was a long and hard-earned sense of school leader savvy that is only acquired through time and trials. Although he made leading his school look effortless, under the surface, he was carefully navigating an intricate matrix of school dynamics, relationships, situational awareness, and policy manifestations. He had learned how to get things done, whom to ask for favors, which language to use with whom, and myriad other insider secrets that enabled him to achieve his goals. This was not to say that he had not met with obstacles or resistance to his efforts. There was that recalcitrant board member who folded and sailed a paper airplane across the board room when my father asked the board to approve an initiative. There were parents and teachers who resisted changes to traditional structures. There were policies to work within and around. But after fifteen-
plus years, he had learned how to use his influence and authority to make changes in his school’s culture and practices despite the obstacles.

Principals like my father populate thousands of schools across the United States, each day quietly attending to the business of their schools, more often quotidian in nature than glamorous or heroic. Still, their decisions have the power to impact their students, staff, and school community in more than subtle ways. Research supports the assertion that school leaders have at least indirect, if not direct, influence over the functioning of their schools. Principals’ behaviors and choices influence teacher motivation (Davis and Wilson, 2000), school climate (Devos and Bouckenooghe, 2009; MacNeil et al., 2009), instruction (Crum & Sherman, 2008), and student achievement (MacNeil et al., 2009; Nettles, 2005). Principals develop an understanding of the inner workings of their school, including the maintenance of facilities, transportation schedules, parking lot traffic flow, staff dynamics, master schedule pitfalls, cafeteria worker shortages, recent test scores, teacher absences, parent personalities, community resources, *ad infinitum*. In addition, principals tend to be deeply committed to their schools, often working 60-80 hours or more a week (Billot, 2003) and filling in on campus in a variety of capacities from substitute teaching to distributing textbooks in the bookstore. Some endure stress and trauma in order to buffer their students and staff from exigent forces and to protect the learning environment (Lindle, 2004). Some principals use their positions to enact changes aimed at addressing disparities between underserved groups and groups that have historically received greater opportunities and resources (Theoharis, 2007).
Political Context of the Study

Since NCLB became federal law in 2002, principals’ responsibilities have included monitoring their schools’ progress to ensure they meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), fulfilling their new role of “chief accountability officer” (Lyons & Algozzinne, 2006). For principals of schools that fail to meet AYP for more than two years, sanctions such as restructuring or firings could occur. In addition, poor school labels resulting from low test scores are published, and parents may withdraw their children from those schools, resulting in decreased staffing and funding. As a result, accountability requirements are a significant concern for school principals.

At the time of this study, the No Child Left Behind law, an extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was due to be reauthorized. While many educators might be glad that the Department of Education plans to reduce the role of standardized testing and punitive measures for failure to meet AYP\(^1\), they will also notice that accountability for student achievement remains a key component of the proposed reauthorization (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Therefore, accountability policies are likely to remain a central responsibility of school and district leaders.

While accountability remains a constant in the educational landscape, two additional factors provided context for my study: the re-segregation of many schools and school districts (Levine, 2012) and policy makers’ concern that students of the United States are being outperformed by students of other countries (Wagner, 2008). Schools

\(^1\)Instead of solely using standardized test scores to determine AYP, the Obama administration promises to expand ways for schools to prove their progress and to prompt competition for federal grant money (Dillon, 2010).
have become increasingly segregated in the last decade with lowest performing schools comprised largely of poor and minority students (Kozol, 2006). Meanwhile, the generalized fear that U.S. students lag behind other nations’ students requires that public schools prove their effectiveness, regardless of the historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral factors which have created disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These factors provide a dual challenge for school leaders: providing equitable education for changing school populations while proving to the public that their schools are producing competitive graduates.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study was to identify and analyze how accountability policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Arizona Learns (AZ Learns) affect principals’ job responsibilities, autonomy, and ability to pursue social justice in their schools. Through qualitative interviews of superintendents, high school principals, and teachers, I was able to identify four key findings regarding principal leadership under accountability policy. First, high school principals appear to be in the business of selling change to their school staffs and communities. The changes they must lead their staffs through are sometimes the result of state or federal accountability policy and sometimes the result of local district policy. Second, high school principals appear to be limited more by their own district policies than by state or federal accountability policies. In fact, they were generally able to use their school’s performance on state and national accountability measures as the impetus for changes they wished to make on their campuses. Third, high school principals must contend with district, state, and national accountability policies that are rigid or often do not have the flexibility to address the specific needs of the
principal and her school. And finally, school principals are able to effect greater positive changes when they have the resources and funding needed to do so. In other words, money does matter.

**Research Questions**

In studying school principals who were considered “effective” by their superintendents, I sought to gauge to what degree accountability policies have impacted principals who were successful in leading their schools. If these principals were impacted or their autonomy curtailed by the requirements associated with stricter accountability policies, then, it would stand to reason that other principals felt similar effects. I surmised that principals’ jobs would be impacted by accountability policy in several areas, but I chose to focus on the areas of principals’ job responsibility, autonomy, and abilities to pursue social justice. Therefore my research questions were the following:

1. How have NCLB and Arizona Learns affected Arizona principals’ job responsibilities?
2. How have NCLB and Arizona Learns affected Arizona principals’ perceived autonomy?
3. How have NCLB and Arizona Learns affected Arizona principals’ abilities to pursue social justice within their schools?

**Importance of the Research**

At the district level, my findings offer insight to school districts so that they may better provide principal support, equitable resource allocation, and professional development. At the state level, my answers to these questions provide grounds for further examination of accountability policy and offer policymakers an inside view of
their policies’ implementation. Furthermore, the results of this study validate what good school leaders do already. These school leaders provide leadership models for what could be done on school campuses in similar contexts.

Some research points to the positive effects of NCLB and state accountability policies’ in promoting equitable school practices (Skrla, 2003). If accountability policies do, indeed, strengthen principals’ ability to create more equitable learning experiences in Arizona’s public schools, then the state department’s revision of AZ Learns might include policies that enable principals to use accountability policy as a lever to promote equity.

**The Research Gap**

Some empirical studies address the impact of Arizona Learns upon language learners in Arizona schools, but there are no studies that address the impact of the law upon principals’ job responsibilities and autonomy. Several researchers have acknowledged the need for more scholarship in the area of principal autonomy, yet few researchers have examined how principals actually use their existing autonomy, nor do they ask principals what kind of autonomy would help them do their jobs more effectively. For example, Goodman, Baron, and Myers (2005) called for more research on principals who negotiate autonomy with outside entities like central offices or state departments. Likewise, Crum and Sherman (2008) cited the need for more research regarding autonomy in principal leadership under NCLB while Skrla (2003) called for research on successful principals’ responses to and implementation of accountability policies. Of the studies that do address principal autonomy directly, few are qualitative. The most pointed discussion of public school principal autonomy is quantitative and is
based upon analyses of data collected before NCLB took effect (Gawlik, 2008). My research fills a qualitative research gap and examines social justice as a major factor in principal leadership.

**Arizona Learns**

During 2010-2011, Arizona Learns legislation fulfilled NCLB’s requirement for the state-level accountability measurement system in Arizona. In addition to determining whether or not schools had met federally established guidelines for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the state created its own school labels according to a point system it established. For example, schools earned points depending on the number of students who met or exceeded state standards on the test called Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). K-8 schools earned points for student performance on the tests in relation to a baseline score the state formulated for that incorporated the school’s SES and previous scores. In addition to points for improvement of test scores, high schools could earn points by reducing their dropout rates and increasing their graduation rates. Depending on the number of points they received across these indicators, schools were labeled *Underperforming, Performing, Performing Plus, Highly Performing,* or *Excelling.*

According to Glass (2007), Arizona’s choice of accountability system made it one of the most punitive systems among its southwestern neighbors. The first year that schools failed to make AYP, Arizona labeled them *Underperforming,* which meant they were required to submit a school improvement plan to the state department of education.

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2 These labels were not determined by NCLB. Arizona chose these labels. Arizona subsequently changed these labels to letter grades from “A” to “F” in 2011 (Arizona Department of Education, 2008).
outlining the steps they would take to improve. In their second year of Underperforming, schools were required to notify parents of their status and offer students transportation to other schools that were not Underperforming. After two years of failure to meet AYP, schools were labeled Failing and underwent corrective action which could include school visitations, hearings, or change of school leadership. If schools did not meet AYP after a fourth year, they were subject to “alternate governance” and could be run by an outside entity, such as a private corporation overseen by the state department (Arizona Department of Education, 2007). After five years of failure to meet AYP, the school staff could be fired, and the school closed, or the school could be restructured and reopened as a charter school.

**Why Social Justice?**

After decades of segregation and unequal educational opportunities, schools were federally de-segregated in the 1960s and 1970s and structures were put into place to ensure more equitable opportunities were offered to minority students (Orfield & Yun, 1999). However, the trend of resegregation is growing as school choice has allowed parents to choose schools that were not their neighborhood schools. The school choice trend has contributed to resegregation as the populations of self-selected schools are more likely to be White for white students and Black or Latino for Black or Latino students (Garcia, 2008). And where school choice was touted as a means for minority and poor parents to choose higher achieving schools for their children, few low income and minority parents actually moved their children to higher achieving traditional or charter schools (Powers, Topper, & Silver, 2012).
Because of this trend, it is ever important for school leaders to be able to serve their populations with equitable opportunities that match those afforded to other students in different schools. Separate is not equal. If we do not make social justice a focus, then we risk providing separate educational experiences for different groups of students. Because of this recent phenomenon, I wondered if school leaders were actively working to equalize educational opportunities for historically underserved or marginalized students—my definition of social justice—and if they were, did accountability hinder or help them? Did school leaders have the autonomy they wanted or needed to serve their students equally?

Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship I found between social justice, autonomy, and accountability. Social justice is possible when principals have a degree of autonomy necessary to implement their social justice-related goals when state and federal accountability policy align with principals’ social justice-related goals. Although there was some evidence in the study that Arizona Learns hindered some students’ abilities to earn a high school diploma, external accountability policies did, sometimes, support and reinforce social justice efforts if principals used them to further their goals.
Figure 1. The relationship between accountability, autonomy, and social justice

**Definitions of Concepts**

*Accountability.* At the most basic level, accountability is used to describe the responsibility an organization has to its stakeholders. Accountability is usually expected of schools in three areas: adherence to professional norms, compliance to rules and policies, and producing expected results (Anderson, 2005). These expected results are usually student achievement and are most often measured through standardized tests.

While many educators do not object to accountability for student learning, they often object to standardized testing as the sole indicator of student learning. Dorn (2007) called our nation’s system of accountability though standardized testing an “accountability Frankenstein,” a monster that distracts teachers from key tasks and dehumanizes education (p. xi). However extreme Dorn is in his view, he is not alone. There are many authors whose critiques of standardized testing are educational
bestsellers (see Alfie Kohn, George Madaus, Michael Russell, Jennifer Higgins, and Deborah Meier). For those schools that do not show expected results through standardized testing, there are sanctions such as closing schools and firing staffs (ADE, 2010). This kind of accountability is what Ravitch (2010) called “punitive accountability,” a form of accountability she contrasted with “positive accountability” (p. 163). With positive accountability, low test scores would spur an effort by state agencies to help struggling schools. Instead of firing staffs or closing schools down, the state would offer struggling schools needed resources and help.

Newmann, King, and Rigdon (1997) differentiated between external and internal accountability. External accountability is an organization’s accountability to outside agents. These agents set standards for the organization’s performance and deliver incentives or sanctions based on the organization’s performance. However, according to Newman et al. (1997), external accountability can be difficult to implement, it does not guarantee high performance from an organization, and it may be unnecessary for organizations that already manifest a strong degree of internal accountability. In an organization that has a high level of internal accountability, members of the organization create their own goals, standards of performance, measurement strategies, and accountability mechanisms. They answer to each other for failure or success rather than to an outside agent.

Newman, King, and Rigdon (1997) found that organizations with strong internal accountability also had greater organizational capacity—the “degree to which the human, technical, and social resources of an organization are organized into effective collective enterprise”—than those with strong external accountability (p. 47). When schools with
strong internal accountability were met with external accountability that “promulgate[d] standards and incentives hostile to a school’s internal accountability system” (p. 48), external accountability often undermined organizational capacity and hampered internal accountability.

Accountability policies. The two accountability policies I include in my study are No Child Left Behind and Arizona Learns. Both are forms of external accountability but have implications for internal accountability as well, as I discuss in the Review of the Literature.

Autonomy. Shank (1994, cited by Goodman, Byron, & Myers, 2005) defined autonomy as “a measure of an institution’s independence and self-directedness and the degree to which it is free of interference by outside authority” (p. 300). For some leaders, true autonomy might embody Shank’s description of freedom from interference by outside authority. Realistically, however, autonomy is tempered by some form of accountability. Wohlstetter et al. (1995) noted that autonomy and freedom are not synonymous; that autonomy is multidimensional and contextual, depending on the circumstances and expectations of different stakeholders. Organizations typically experience a continuum of autonomy: where at one end of the continuum lies total freedom and the other end total restraint; most organizations fall somewhere in between.

For the purpose of my study, I defined autonomy as the authority that school principals have to make decisions based on their experiences, stakeholder recommendations, site council input, goals, and internal values. I applied the term authority from Tucker and Coddington’s (2002) observation that without authority to make decisions, principals are relatively impotent to improve their schools.
The areas of principal autonomy that I addressed included, but are not limited to, the authority of the school principal to allocate staffing flexibly, to allocate money as needed, to select educational programs and materials, and to adopt structures and practices that promote his/her vision for the school. Finally, although the literature reveals the growing trend of principals sharing their leadership through Distributed Leadership (see Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004), the scope of my study was limited to principals’ perspectives of their own autonomy as the leaders of their schools. Likewise, under current site-based management models, certain school decisions are intended to be made by a site council or advisory group, which may include staff, students, and community members. In general, the principal is ultimately held accountable for the outcomes of shared decisions.

Social justice. Bogotch, Shoorman, and Miron (2008) found defining social justice problematic, calling it a “contested construct” (p. 12). Because of the term’s elasticity it has been “made to fit any number of social, economic, political, and educational problems” (p. 5). I concurred. In my study of social justice leadership, I have come across varied interpretations of what constitutes social justice, ranging from schools increasing the test scores of their minority students (Ravitch, 2010) to establishing an urban community center in Venezuela (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002). Bogotch, Shoorman, and Miron (2008) also distinguished between the “what” and “how” of social justice, arguing that while many educators think they are teaching social justice, they are merely teaching about the possibilities of social justice.

My definition of social justice is an amalgam of some of my favorite researchers’ views: Like Bogotch, Shoorman, and Miron (2008), I see the impetus for social justice as
stemming from a sense of personal or social responsibility to “repair the world” (p. 6). And like Goldfarb & Grinberg (2002), I see the purpose of these repairs as addressing violations of the “inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness” (p. 162). Finally, like Oakes et al. (2000), I believe that social justice requires us to become change agents who are willing to challenge systematic injustices we encounter. However, in order to simplify the term for my participants, I defined “social justice in education” as “expanding and equalizing opportunities for students who have been traditionally underserved or marginalized.”

**Socially just practices.** In education, there are practices that educators can pursue to “repair the worlds” of their students (Bogotch et al., 2008). In keeping with the above definition of social justice, I view these practices as activism because they may require disrupting taken-for-granted systems. Engaging in activism may evoke resistance from some stakeholders because they do not seem common sense (Apple, 2004). In education, socially just practices include, but are not limited to, de-tracking students, providing minority students’ access to rigorous classes, allowing students to form gay/straight alliances, promoting inclusion of special education students, re-allocating resources to be more equitably shared, creating minority-only parent advisory groups, and changing school cultures to view diversity as an asset instead of a deficit.

Other terms are defined in context of the study in the chapters that follow.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

In this chapter, I introduce the effective principal as a leader of a complex organization, bound by policy, responsible for multifarious workings of the school, but able to navigate challenges and responsibilities to pursue his/her goals. In addition, I
establish the context of the study within current accountability policies resulting from the national call to produce graduates who can compete with other nations’ graduates juxtaposed against a gradual re-segregation of several groups of students. I comment on how it is important for principals to have the autonomy they need to make decisions that serve their schools’ populations. Finally, I define key concepts as they pertain to the scope of this study.

In the next chapter, I review the literature on principal leadership in two parts. First, I review the literature which helps me to establish my conceptual framework, specifically regarding the debate over current external accountability policies. Second, I review the empirical literature on principal leadership and what the literature reveals are some of the complexities inherent in the principal’s job since NCLB. Third, I review the literature on autonomy and how autonomy may or may not figure into principals’ efficacy. Finally, I review the nascent literature on social justice leadership.

In Chapter 3, I introduce and explain the methods used in my study, including descriptions of my participants, the school districts I studied, the interview structure, and data analysis strategies I used. Chapters 4 and 5 contain reports of my findings organized by research question and leadership style. Finally, in Chapter 6, I summarize and discuss my findings and suggest implications for policy and practice.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A substantial body of literature on school principals and their job responsibilities provides the basis for my study. I initially conducted a systematic search of school principals’ uses of their autonomy searching for “school principal” and “autonomy” in EBSCO Academic Search Premier, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. This search netted more studies of principals’ job responsibilities than studies of principal autonomy per se. As I read further about the impact of NCLB upon principals’ job responsibilities, I broadened my search to principals’ responses to accountability policies and focused on how school leaders interacted with and disseminated accountability policies differently. I also read several books containing theory and studies on principal leadership and used these books’ bibliographies to expand my research. From these sources, I identified four key leadership roles. Of the leadership roles I came across, I decided to focus on the principals who chose to spend their time and effort pursuing social justice because it was a relatively new area with potential for original research to be conducted. Furthermore, I noticed a gap in research where social justice leadership met accountability policy.

First, however, to situate my research in the current educational debate on accountability, I review some literature on No Child Left Behind as it relates to accountability and school principal leadership.

Responses to NCLB

Objections to NCLB

There are two ostensibly opposing views of accountability via NCLB. In the first view, NCLB is censured for exacerbating educational inequity by punishing schools that
are already in distress. In the second view, the law is acknowledged as a potential, if not imperfect, lever for change. Examining both arguments helps to establish the context of accountability policy in Arizona as Arizona Learns is an extension of the federal law.

In general, critics of NCLB object to increasing accountability requirements without increasing support for struggling schools. Many of the nation’s “failing” schools are those with predominantly minority and low income populations and are disproportionately sanctioned (Abernathy, 2007). For instance, schools that serve more diverse groups of students have more ways to fail to make AYP than less diverse schools do. This is because larger schools with diverse students have more subgroups at each grade level that contribute to their AYP determination. As Abernathy (2007) highlighted, there are 37 ways to fail to make AYP at the high school level. As the number of targeted subgroups within a school increases (e.g., students who qualify for free and reduced lunches, minority students, LEP students, special education students), so too does the school’s chances of not making AYP. In fact, even among schools with almost identically average test scores, Novak and Fuller (2003) found that schools that served more subgroups failed to meet their AYP targets more often than schools that served fewer subgroups. States with more diverse student populations are also apt to have higher percentages of failing school districts.

One unintended consequence of NCLB is that students who are members of an AYP subgroup may be viewed by teachers and principals as liabilities. Some educators and leaders are concerned that school district administrators will avoid offering programs and services to meet these students’ needs for fear that they may draw more parents with needy students to their schools (Abernathy, 2007). In addition, schools that receive Title I
funds to help serve their needy populations risk losing some of the very funds intended to alleviate disparities. One sanction for failing to meet AYP requires 10 to 20% of schools’ Title I money be diverted to transportation for students who choose to go to different schools (Abernathy, 2007).

Another argument against NCLB is levied against its reliance on standardized test scores as indicators of school success. Mintrop and Trujillo (2007) asserted that standardized tests are insufficient to determine school quality. Ravitch (2010) noted the tendency of state and district leaders to find ways to “game” the test by reducing the minimum scores students need to be considered proficient (p. 90). For instance, Mississippi claimed that 89% of its fourth grade students were reading at or above grade level, but the same students’ NAEP scores revealed that only 18% were at or above grade level. This example, according to Ravitch (2010), illustrates one way for states to game the system: lowering cut scores to ensure that they will have a sufficient number of students who test at a proficient level. In addition, Abernathy (2007) noted the strong relationship between test scores and students’ social backgrounds. In other words, NCLB may do a better job of measuring students’ resources, peer influence, and parental involvement than the quality of instruction a student receives.

**NCLB’s Potential to Promote Equity**

On the other hand, although anathema to many American educators, it should be noted that one of the goals of NCLB was to close the achievement gap (Abernathy, 2007). Its accountability component calls attention to the performance of minority and income-based subgroups that may have been previously ignored. Skrla et al. (2006) noted four positive effects on equity via NCLB: (a) establishing a common set of “explicit
expectations for student achievement not based on deficit assumptions,” (b) focusing public attention on the existence of achievement gaps, (c) providing data transparency, and (d) focusing district and school leaders on their responsibility to equitably educate all of their students (p. 254). Through the use of equity audits, school leaders can assess their practices and identify ways to help their schools become more equity-oriented.

School principals have also used NCLB mandates to make changes that provide greater opportunities for historically underserved students where other reforms had been less than effective (Marshall & Ward, 2004). Adams and Kirst (1999) noted that accountability policies could be used to serve social justice ends, such as measuring the progress of desegregation goals, tracking equity in resource allocation, and assuring that district accounts are managed properly. These potentially positive results of accountability measures remind us that accountability policies are neither inherently good nor bad. More often, positive and negative effects of accountability policy exist side-by-side within education (Skrla, 2003).

**Review of the Empirical Literature**

Against this policy backdrop, I examine the empirical literature on school principals’ job responsibilities, autonomy, and work toward social justice. I start with an examination of four primary principal roles that are reiterated throughout the literature on principal leadership, followed by a discussion of literature regarding principal autonomy. Finally, I expound some recent research focused on social justice from a school leader’s perspective.
Principal Roles

The principal’s role has expanded to include new responsibilities that principals of the past did not have to contend with. Historically in the United States, the principal’s job began as a “head teacher” who shared in the teaching load. But as efficiency and managerial needs became paramount, the bureaucratic role of the principal took him out of the classroom and reduced his teaching role to persuading teachers to pursue the goals he set for the school (Cuban, 1988).

Today, it is generally expected that school principals will strive to be instructional leaders, but they are also responsible for a gamut of other managerial tasks which may limit their time for instructional leadership. As instructional leaders, principals help establish instructional goals for their campuses, visit classrooms, meet with teachers to discuss their teaching, and provide professional development that will improve their staffs’ abilities to increase student achievement (Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2009). As managers, principals are responsible for supervising school facilities, overseeing their schools’ budgets, and enforcing school policies. Newer conceptions of principal roles posit principals as transformational leaders who guide their schools through second order changes—larger scale changes—and more recently, as social justice leaders who advocate for marginalized populations of students. Realistically, principals may fulfill several roles within their careers and perhaps even within the same day. In the following paragraphs, I examine the literature on four of the most frequently identified principal

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3 Historically, school principals were predominantly male, while the majority of the teaching staff were female (Cuban, 1988).
roles: (a) manager, (b) instructional leader, (c) transformative leader, and (d) social justice leader.

**The Role of Manager**

While the role of principal as manager is eschewed by most principals (Barty et al., 2005), the same principals will admit that they must devote significant time to management tasks within their daily responsibilities (Billot, 2003; Cranston, 2002; Crum & Sherman, 2008). To these responsibilities, Lyons and Algozzine (2006) added the role of chief educational accountability officer. The principals interviewed in the above studies stated that although they wished they had more time to devote to instructional leadership, they spent large portions of their time in management and administrative tasks. In fact, one reason that Barty et al. (2005) cited to explain principal shortages in Australia was the amount of time applicants feared they would have to spend in management tasks as opposed to instructional leadership. Wright (2009) asserted that adding more management responsibilities inhibited instructional leadership by reducing the principal’s time available for meeting with teachers and reflecting upon their own practice as leaders. Moreover, technical leadership appeared to be valued and reinforced by district offices through hiring practices; district superintendents tended to hire candidates with strong managerial skills versus strong educational leadership skills (Marshall & Ward, 2004).

If principals’ time is heavily invested in managerial tasks and less so on curricular tasks, their schools may be impacted as well. In a 2004 study of principal time allocation, Abernathy (2007) analyzed survey data from Minnesota principals who shared how they allocated their time at work during the previous month. Specifically, Abernathy was
interested in how principals at “five-star schools”—excelling schools labeled by the Minnesota department of Education—allocated their time, compared to principals of schools that failed to make AYP. Through regression analyses Abernathy sought to determine whether a principal’s time allocation made their school more or less likely to meet AYP or to receive a five-star rating. Principals who spent “relatively more time reaching out to parent communities” were almost twice as likely to lead five-star schools; likewise, principals who spent more time on curriculum work and less time on security or managing facilities were also more likely to meet AYP and be a five-star school (p. 69).

Abernathy concluded that time allocation is crucial: principals who must spend time on school security or managing facilities have less time to devote to curriculum or community outreach, two practices associated with five-star schools. These findings forecast the importance of principals making time to spend in curricular and interpersonal work even though management duties call.

**The Role of Educational/Instructional Leadership**

The majority of principals described in studies would rather spend their time in educationally related or instructional tasks, such as coaching teachers, developing strategies for increasing student learning, or planning professional development for their staff (Billot, 2003; Cranston, 2002; Crum & Sherman, 2008). Principals who spend time in these areas are more likely to foster positive school climates than those who do not.

Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) identified how different instructional leadership

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4 The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium developed six standards for principals as educational leaders, including Standard 2, which defines the principal as “an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009).
behaviors impacted school climate. The researchers measured school climate using teachers’ ratings of their participation in decision making, innovation, and cooperation in school decision making. Using Quinn’s (1984) competing values framework, the Devos and Bouckenooghe analyzed questionnaire and interview data from 46 Flanders primary school principals to determine which tasks they felt were most important in their roles as leaders and how they felt leaders should act (cited in Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2009). Of these principals, they selected three prototypical or “polar types” of leaders from Quinn’s model for extensive case study analysis: a people-minded principal with strong school climate, an administrative-minded principal with weak climate, and a moderate-minded principal with average school climate. They then compared the teachers’ ratings with the principals’ responses and found that the principal whose school was rated lowest in school climate was the principal whom teachers perceived as most dedicated to managerial tasks, resource allocation, and paperwork. While the principal saw herself as a “coordinator and mentor,” her staff did not see her this way because she spent more time in her office than around the school or in classrooms (p. 186). The principal with the highest rated school climate was a self-identified “educational leader” who developed relationships with his teachers and devoted time to instructional improvement and changes. The authors suggested that principals who place instructional leadership above administrative leadership are strong leaders in general because they are also apt to establish professional learning communities, develop relationships with teachers through mentoring, and spend time in teachers’ classrooms.
The Role of Transformational Leader

Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) argued that educational leadership was more of a slogan and less of a model that could be empirically studied. Therefore, they designed a new model of leadership they called *transformational leadership*. A transformational leader, they said, shared authority and influence among many members of the organization in order to inspire collective commitments to the organization’s goals. Leithwood and Jantzi’s concept of transformational leadership is similar to what other scholars have described as “distributed” or shared leadership (e.g., Fullan, 2004).

In their study of the effects of transformational leadership upon teachers’ motivation, capacity, and work environments, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) defined *capacity* as “the actual ability to perform, the belief in one’s ability” (p. 207). Using survey data from 2,290 teachers from 655 primary schools, the researchers assessed the relationship between leadership style and student achievement in schools implementing England’s National Numeracy and Literacy reforms. Their study yielded four key results. First, teachers noted that during the reforms, few principals had practiced transformational leadership. However, for those principals who did practice transformational leadership, their teachers changed their classroom practices more than teachers whose principals did not practice transformational leadership. In other words, transformational leadership practices had a moderate and significant effect on teachers’ implementation. Second, principals’ use of transformational leadership resulted in more positive teacher perceptions of their work setting and motivation. Third, transformational leadership had weaker but significant effects on teachers’ capacity. Finally, while gains in student achievement were not significantly related to leadership in the schools
implementing the literacy reforms, they were related to teachers’ practices. These results suggest that even weak levels of transformational or distributed leadership can lead teachers to change their practices and to feel positively about their work settings.

Helping teachers improve their instruction and effectiveness may require principals to practice more than one leadership approach. Marks and Printy (2003) studied the effects of a combination of instructional leadership and transformational leadership upon teachers applying new pedagogies in their classrooms. The researchers’ findings revealed that unless principals practiced instructional leadership combined with transformational leadership, their teachers did not adopt the new teaching strategies they were asked to employ. It was only when principals intentionally sought and fostered the teachers’ engagement through transformational behaviors that the teachers integrated new practices in their classrooms (Marks & Printy, 2003). These findings reiterate that leadership roles are neither self-contained nor discrete; rather, they are parts of a leader’s repertoire and can overlap or be applied as needed.

The Role of Social Justice Leadership

Because social justice leadership is a central focus in my study, I provide a brief overview of the role here and a more detailed analysis of significant studies that address social justice within accountability policy at the end of this chapter.

Theoharis (2009) defined social justice leaders as those who answer an inner call to “create schools that oppose oppression and suffering by transforming them into models of equity and communities of justice” (Theoharis, 2009, p. 8). Bogotch, Shoorman, and Miron (2008) argued that fostering equity at schools requires school leaders to take “deliberate actions beyond school routines and even beyond exemplary educational
practices” (p. 13). Social justice leadership requires a regular practice of advocacy, struggle against injustice, and self-reflection (Bogotch, 2002). According to Marshall and Ward (2004), social justice leadership is a role that may be addressed in pre-service leadership training but is not typically promoted by formal district policies.

Social justice leadership may be admirable but not appealing to some leaders because of the extra work associated with leading schools made up of underprivileged students (Loeb et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2007). In a recent study of principal job location preferences in Miami Dade County Public Schools, researchers concluded that principals demonstrated an aversion to leading schools with large poor, minority, and/or low achieving students (Loeb et al., 2010). Although the principals in this study did not express an aversion to the students themselves, they were driven by a desire to lead schools with positive climates, schools that were well-resourced, and schools with good working conditions.

On the contrary, what deters some attracts others to lead in high-need schools. For instance, Barty et al. (2005) concluded that although Australian schools faced a shortage of principal applicants, poor urban and rural Australian schools did not necessarily suffer a disproportionate shortage of applicants. The positions in these disadvantaged schools were filled by leaders who sought them out as an opportunity to make a difference for high needs students. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect some principals may self-select schools with greater social justice needs where they may pursue social justice work. Brown (2006) noted that principals who serve high need populations impact their schools more than principals who serve less needy populations. Yet Kruger, Witzier, and Sleegers (2007) noted that principals alone might not have the power to change certain exogenous
factors. For instance, Kruger et al. (2007) measured the relationship between principals’ behaviors on students’ level of commitment to their schools (“commitment” was defined as students’ perceptions of their relationships with their teachers and school culture). However, no significant correlation was found between what the principal did and the level of his/her students’ commitment to their school. Instead, student commitment was associated with exogenous factors including school location, student SES, and school size. An interesting finding the researchers noted was that the lower the student commitment to the school, the more strategic planning their principals engaged in, suggesting that there is a reciprocal relationship between low student commitment and principal behavior, i.e., that principals respond to the needs of their students.

**Accountability Policy and Principal Job Responsibility**

The literature on school principal leadership since NCLB depicts a job that has become increasingly complex, stressful, and paradoxical (Billot, 2003; Cranston, 2002; Crum & Sherman, 2008; Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2009; Lindle, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; Wildy & Louden, 2000). Principals must continually balance contradictory expectations and roles (Campbell, Gold & Lunt, 2003; Crum & Sherman, 2008; Wildy & Louden, 2000). They must be members of the team, but are ultimately responsible for the outcomes that result from team decision making. They must share their leadership, but are accountable for their schools’ progress toward goals. They must be efficient, but are also expected to be reflective and visionary. They must empower their staffs and encourage teacher leaders, but they must monitor and evaluate their teachers’ performance. They must, in essence, “steer a steady course between opposites” (Wildy & Louden, 2000, p. 173). Acting as mediators between the central office and their schools,
some principals buffer their staffs from bureaucratic directives or an emphasis on test scores (Belchetz, 2004). Acting as agents for their schools, principals can also reach out for community involvement and parental support of their initiatives (Good, 2008) and create access to opportunities for students (Wright, 2009). Schools, too, are paradoxical institutions: they must educate all, but they also sort students according to their qualifications. Individuals who take on school leadership must somehow be able to reconcile the paradoxical nature of schooling itself.

Wildy and Louden (2000) identified three dilemmas that effective principals must reconcile in their practice: autonomy, efficiency, and accountability. The dilemma of autonomy requires principals to exert strong but shared leadership; the dilemma of efficiency exhorts principals to be collaborative but efficient; and the dilemma of accountability calls for local decision-making that complies with external accountability systems. At times given more control over school resources and spending but constrained by central directives, principals often experience the “schizophrenic effect” of decentralization (Billot, 2003, p. 47): some voices urge innovation while others stress uniformity and efficiency.

As much literature suggests, accountability reforms have changed school principals’ jobs, adding what some view as new accountability-related responsibilities (Barty et al., 2005; Belchetz, 2004; Billot, 2003; Cranston, 2002; Good, 2008).

A review of international literature revealed that principals were usually the school-level mediators of accountability reforms in their countries as well (Cranston, 2002; Skrla, 2003; Wildy & Louden, 2000). Internationally, principals faced challenges to their time management, instructional leadership, and ability to complete diverse
responsibilities when accountability policies were implemented. Decentralization reforms, particularly in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom have increased school autonomy but have made principals more directly accountable for higher student achievement (Belchetz, 2004; Billot, 2003; Cranston, 2002; Wildy & Louden, 2000).

Although policies promoting the decentralization of schools imply reduced accountability to the central authority, some principals found themselves doing just as much accountability work as before their schools were decentralized. Cranston (2002) noted that the Australian principals he/she interviewed still had to make time to complete accountability reports although their schools were decentralized. This added responsibility reduced their time for instructional leadership. Interestingly, while the principals themselves did not resist the accountability policy—nor did they view accountability negatively—there was a marked attrition of school principals after the decentralization reform was implemented, suggesting that only the hearty adapted to the new challenges of time management and added responsibility.

Principals are subject to burning out on the job because they are overworked and overwhelmed. In a study of the antecedents of principal burnout, Friedman (2002) found that among the Israeli principals he surveyed, one of the strongest predictors of principal burnout was a “sense of uncontrollability” (p. 246). The burnt out principals reported that they could not control their paperwork, management demands, or relationships with teachers and parents and felt overloaded by the Education Ministry’s confusing instructions. Likewise, Billot (2003) noted that the New Zealand principals in decentralized schools resented the “continual interventions of the Ministry of Education”
and wished they had more time to build their relationships with teachers and students (p. 44-45). They also wished to spend more time in strategic planning with their staffs for innovative solutions to school challenges.

**Accountability Policy and Principal Autonomy**

The majority of the literature on principal autonomy focuses primarily on the abilities of school site councils or school decision-making bodies to make decisions rather than on principal autonomy alone (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Goodman, Baron, & Myers, 2005; Wildy & Louden, 2000). However, within these decision-making bodies, the principal can exert autonomy or influence, as long as he/she meets district expectations and operates within the law (Kemper & Teddlie, 2000). Abernathy (2007) noted that while there are some areas over which principals have direct control, such as the quality of leadership at their school, there are other areas over which principals have little to no control, such as staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. Yet, Tucker and Codding (2002) asserted that as principals’ jobs demand greater levels of accountability for student achievement, school districts should allow principals greater authority over school-wide decisions. Not surprisingly, the tensions and contradictions associated with the principal’s job could explain why some researchers have reported a shortage of principal applicants in some areas (Barty et al., 2005; Billot, 2003; Friedman, 2002).

Three empirical studies help to illuminate the current status of principal autonomy since NCLB. The first, a study by Abernathy (2007), was completed with survey data of 1,434 Minnesota school principals in the fall of 2003. The researcher conducted a series of regression models based on principal, student, and school characteristics in order to identify principals’ perceived levels of influence post NCLB. The study compared
principals in traditional public schools that had made AYP with principals in traditional public schools that had failed to make AYP. First, the principals were asked to use a scale of 1-5 (where 1 = “Limits very much” 3 = “No effect” and 5 = “Enhances very much”) to rate the level of their expected influence in six school policy areas. Then, principals were asked to rate their actual influence in these areas before school report cards were published. The six policy areas included (a) setting performance standards, (b) guiding the curriculum, (c) setting disciplinary policy, (d) hiring teachers, (e) evaluating teachers, and (f) setting the budget. Abernathy’s findings confirmed that the schools’ failure to make AYP was associated with lower levels of principals’ perceived influence across the six policy areas, particularly in the area of setting performance standards and guiding the development of curriculum. Surprisingly, the two areas where principals expected to have the most influence—performance standards and curriculum—were the two areas in which they felt the least influence. Conversely, the areas where principals felt most influential—hiring and evaluating teachers—were two areas they had anticipated least benefitting from after NCLB (Abernathy, 2007). These findings suggest that principals of schools that fail to meet AYP are less likely to perceive themselves as very influential in their schools compared to principals of schools that meet AYP.

A second study illustrates a downside of increased accountability without increased autonomy. Papa and Baxter (2008) surveyed principals of urban and low-performing schools in New York and found that while the principals were required to increase student achievement for accountability purposes, they could not hire the teachers they needed to accomplish their goals. The lack of autonomy in staffing one’s school to one’s liking is an area noted by other researchers as well (Abernathy, 2007; Gawlick,
2008). However, in Papa and Baxter’s study, a key finding was that the longer the principal had served in a particular school, the more he felt he could influence the hiring process at his school. This finding echoes Haynes and Licata’s (1995) finding that veteran principals were more likely to challenge rules through creative insubordination because they had more “innate knowledge” of certain contexts and what would work in them (p. 32). Principal autonomy appears to be associated with principal longevity.

Finally, principals have some autonomy in how they mediate the effects of district and state policies on their campuses. They can buffer their staff from policies they view as frustrating or more actively implement policies they view as helpful. In her study of principals’ responses to accountability policies, Skrla (2003) and a research team conducted extensive qualitative interviews and onsite visits of four school districts in Texas that had narrowed their achievement gaps on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and SAT/ACT scores. They interviewed board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, central office staff, parents, newspaper staff, and business leaders to find out how they perceived principals’ handling of accountability policy implementation. Their findings revealed that many principals used their influence to mediate the effects of policy in ways that successfully served their schools. First, principals used accountability policy to leverage their own goals of equitably teaching all students without “making excuses” for poor student achievement (p. 38). Second, principals used accountability policy to justify restructuring teachers’ workdays so that they could plan together and collaborate with special education teachers. Third, principals used accountability policy as a catalyst for increased interaction with people on their campus, prompting more classroom visits and reflective questioning for teachers. Fourth,
principals influenced their school’s organizational culture, using accountability policy to communicate high expectations for all students.

**Charter School Principal Autonomy**

A frequent theme in educational literature on principal autonomy is a comparison between the autonomy of charter school principals and traditional public school principals. Charter schools are generally assumed to have more autonomy than traditional public schools. However, some empirical research suggests otherwise. Johnson and Landman (2000) characterized charter school principals and sponsors as varying in their willingness to share their autonomy with their teaching staff, stating that there was no guarantee that the bureaucracy and flexibility of the conventional public school wouldn’t be replaced by an “equally inflexible set[s] of rules and procedures that exclude teachers entirely” in the charter schools (p. 115). Ultimately, it was not the policy that determined whether de-regulated schools attracted and retained dedicated teachers; it was the principal leadership or the specific practices that were adopted by the schools under the policy.

Two recent studies used the 1999-2000 School and Staffing Survey (SASS) to analyze autonomy in charter schools and conventional public schools (Gawlik, 2008; Powers, 2009). Analyzing principal responses on the survey, Gawlik (2008) compared principal autonomy (equating influence to autonomy) in start-up charter schools and conversion charter schools (schools which converted from traditional schools to charter schools) to the autonomy of principals in traditional public schools. Among the most salient findings was that traditional public school principals reported having the least amount of autonomy over curriculum, hiring, and school spending compared to start-up
and conversion charter school principals. Principals of private schools that converted to charter schools expressed the highest levels of influence over curriculum and hiring. Principals of urban public schools with low student achievement expressed the lowest levels of autonomy overall. Both charter and traditional public school principals felt constrained by state accountability policies, perceiving a decrease in their autonomy as accountability increased.

In a related study Powers (2009) analyzed the same SASS data and found relatively little difference between charter and conventional public school principals’ perceptions across many questions regarding autonomy. Through the framework of organizational capacity, Powers (2009) examined principals’ and teachers’ responses to survey questions about their perceived influence in different areas of school decision-making and found that charter school principals did perceive slightly higher levels of autonomy in the areas of curriculum, professional development, school spending, and hiring new teachers than did their conventional public school counterparts. This finding echoes other studies which note principals’ limitations in these areas (Abernathy, 2007; Papa & Baxter, 2008). However, within the areas of time allotment, evaluation of teachers, and school discipline, charter and conventional school principals responded similarly. Based on her descriptive analysis, Powers also noted that charter schools were actually less subject to external accountability—state intervention and sanctions—and were more subject to internal accountability—accountability to parents and teachers—than conventional public schools.
Social Justice Leadership

There is a relatively new and growing body of theory and empirical research on principals as social justice leaders (Marshall & Ward, 2004; Skrla et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2009). Starting during the 1990s and increasing in the mid- to late 2000s, the literature reflects an emerging conception of school leaders as possible agents of social change. The literature reveals that while some principals intentionally pursue social justice within their leadership practices, the decision to pursue social justice was largely affected by many factors. Furthermore, although social justice leadership is generally viewed favorably by policy makers and professional principal associations, it is not often mandated in state or district policy. There are many studies of social justice leadership; however, three are particularly relevant as they address the impetus for social justice leadership and the barriers principals face in attempting to make social justice a priority in their leadership.

First is Theoharis’s (2007) autoethnographic study of seven purposefully-selected principals—one of whom was Theoharis himself—who advocated for social justice through a “framework of resistance.” The principals took measures to change inequitable systems and practices at their schools that had historically marginalized students. Through in-depth interviews with each principal, small group meetings with the principals, school visits, interviews with staff and families from each school, and examinations of school documents, Theoharis categorized the principals’ efforts at reducing inequitable treatment of marginalized students into a three-legged approach to social justice school reform: (a) advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity, (b) improving the core learning context, and (c) creating a climate of belonging. Within the
first category of advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity, principals worked to eliminate pullout and separate programs that removed students from music classes or their regular classrooms, reducing transition time and increasing learning time. In addition, some of the principals removed tracking for classes that served as gatekeepers to college: math and foreign language.

Within the second category of improving the core learning context, principals engaged with their staff in discussions of race and designed professional development that made equity a regular focus. In addition, principals hired and supervised their teachers through an equity lens to increase the number of equity-minded people working at their schools.

In the third category of creating a climate of belonging, principals fostered discipline strategies that focused on building relationships and trained teachers and office staff to treat students and their families with respect and graciousness instead of with impatience or “infantilizing” ways (p. 65). Principals influenced the curriculum taught when they encouraged teachers to incorporate social responsibility in their lessons. Another key practice within this category was principals’ outreach efforts to marginalized families and community, including one principal who started a controversial minority-only parent group to give minority parents a voice in their school where they might not otherwise have had one.

Ultimately, the three-legged approach to social justice school reform resulted in improved student achievement at six of the seven principals’ schools and “dramatic academic gains” for marginalized students (Theoharis, 2009, p. 83). In fact, the principals
noted that some groups of students from marginalized backgrounds outperformed or matched their more privileged peers in affluent schools.

However, the seven principals’ routes to success were rarely smooth. They faced resistance from within their school and from the district. These barriers to advancing social justice exacted a physical and emotional toll from the principals, so much so that they found the need to sustain themselves through deliberate coping strategies. While, some of the principals coped personally by working more hours to get the work done and by drinking alcohol to relieve stress, other coping strategies included developing a supportive administrator network and building sustaining relationships with other like-minded leaders.

A second and equally powerful study addressing the barriers change agents face is Oakes et al.’s (2000), a cross-case study analysis of 10 schools that engaged in de-tracking reforms. The researchers followed the efforts of change agents, individuals, or groups of educators and principals, across the nation as they garnered support for and implemented school restructuring reforms to remove tracked remedial and honors classes in middle and high schools. More often, the barriers these change agents faced were not technical or logistical, but were ideological. The most potent obstacles were the white, middle-class parents who feared that the redistribution of resources—resources and opportunities that had once belonged solely to their children would diminish their children’s previous special treatment in honors or AP classes. Ultimately, in some of the schools, the parents were successful in applying their political leverage to intercede in the degree of de-tracking that resulted. But all of the schools were successful in at least eliminating most or all of their remedial classes and were able to open access to honors
classes to all students. Positive benefits also included alleviating racial tension in some schools, changing teachers’ expectations for their heterogeneously grouped classes, and inspiring teachers to improve their teaching methods for these classes.

A third key piece of literature is Marshall and Ward’s (2004) study of “powerful” educational leaders’ and policymakers’ perceptions of training school leaders for social justice leadership. Through interviews of ten highly influential policymakers from educational organizations such as the American Association of School Administration (AASA), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the researchers sought to understand how important policymakers considered social justice leadership training. Three themes emerged from participant responses. First, all of the respondents stated that social justice issues be addressed as a moral imperative in educational policy and by those preparing school leaders for practice. Second, because social justice was usually written into “soft policy,” policy that is implied rather than articulated and measured (p. 532), it carried less weight than other policies. Because social justice policy was not measured in some way in principal effectiveness, it received less time and attention. Third, the respondents suggested ways to make social justice leadership training more effective. Some of the participants advised using NCLB as a lever to prompt school leaders to address inequities in their schools as data disaggregation would make “disparities glaring” (p. 547). In addition, participants recommended creating partnerships with university preparation programs, sustaining ongoing professional development through conferences and conventions which principals attend, and changing principal licensure standards, such as
the ISLLC standards which are used to evaluate principals. This study reiterates a key theme mentioned in the literature on social justice leadership (Skrla et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2007): addressing social justice is generally considered important, but it is difficult to sustain and enforce unless there are structures established to promote and measure it.

**Summary of the Review of Literature**

In the Review of the Literature, I first provided a conceptual review of literature espousing different views of No Child Left Behind as it related to “social justice in education.” In the empirical review of literature, I identified four roles that school principals may embody throughout their practice and how these roles may be influenced by their job responsibilities and leadership goals. Next, I examined three relevant studies of principal autonomy in traditional public and charter schools. Finally, I reviewed three key studies on social justice leadership, including what principals have done to pursue social justice on their campuses and an explanation of why social justice leadership might not be more prevalent in some districts.

**Conceptual Framework**

In constructing a framework for analysis of my findings, I strove to represent the paradox that many principals find themselves in as school leaders. Tucker and Codding (2002) illustrated this paradox well. They asked, “Why would anyone want the job of the principal?” (p. 6) and created a scenario that illustrated the double bind of increased accountability without increased autonomy in which many principals find themselves:

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5 The newer 2008 ISLLC standards included a descriptor under Standard 5, which read, “Promote social justice and ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling.” This addition represents progress made toward social justice in hard policy since the Marshall and Ward (2004) study.
Imagine that you are the principal, this person who is being asked to produce great improvements in student achievement. You cannot select your staff. You cannot fire anyone who is already on your staff. You cannot award or withhold a bonus from anyone. . . . You may have little control over the instructional materials that are used. Someone else controls the training agenda. Someone else controls how the federal program money will be spent. Some people who work in your school report directly to the people in the central office rather than to you. . . . Yet despite all this, if your students do not make progress on the state accountability measures, your school is likely to be put on a public list of low-performing schools. If performance does not improve, your school could be closed, the faculty disbanded, and you fired. You will be held responsible for the whole mess. (pp. 6-7)

Who would want the job of the school principal under such circumstances?

Remarkably, there are certain leaders who do. The framework I created to guide my research analysis was constructed upon different leadership styles, according to how leaders applied the leadership roles identified in the Review of the Literature. Specifically, I examined how principals completed their job responsibilities, how they used their autonomy, and how social justice played a part in their leadership focus.

As central to this framework, I fashioned a new metaphor related to the extant metaphors that describe school leadership. The metaphor engages with a previous discussion about the nature of school leadership and suggests a possible leadership style for principals in the 21st century. In the past, educational researchers have used metaphors to illustrate the many roles principals must fulfill, such as the servant leader (Sergiovanni, 2006), the superhero leader, the savior leader, and the trapeze artist without a net (Cuban, 1988). Both the superhero and the trapeze artist imply death-defying feats of strength necessitating special powers while the servant and savior roles suggest that at the same time, a principal must be humble and self-sacrificing.
Another common motif of principal leadership literature involves the navigation of water. For instance, Theoharis (2007) compared the leaders who push for social justice within their practice to “navigating rough waters” (p. 19). Rapp (2002) characterized social justice principals as those who leave the “comforts and confines of professional codes and state mandates for the riskier waters of high moral callings” (p. 233).

To these water metaphors, I add another, which combines the fearlessness of the trapeze artist without a net and the savvy competence of a skilled river guide—a metaphor adapted from the work of science writer, David Quammen (1998) whose essay, “Vortex,” described the adventures of skilled river kayakers who purposefully enter the dangerous spinning water holes that cautious boaters and rafters avoid. These brazen kayakers learned how to use the natural hydraulics of the tilted whirlpool’s gravity to their advantage, surfing sideways, executing 360 degree spins, or doing water cartwheels. They sought out the most dangerous places in the river in order to use the dangerous forces to their advantage. The school principal, too, may enter into a vortex of sorts, the kind that would pull her down with the momentum and suction of micro and macro-politics, accountability requirements, and responsibilities. She can struggle and flail, and possibly drown, or she can learn to ride the vortex.

Because I view the majority of principals as skilled, competent professionals who struggle with the demands of their jobs and then learn to thrive despite conflicting forces, paradox, and danger to self, my conceptual lens was focused on the manner in which school principals used their various leadership roles effectively in the face of increased external accountability. In essence, they rode the vortex in order to improve their schools, help students learn, help teachers teach, and encourage socially just practices. Despite
resistance, many principals found ways to mediate larger societal and systemic effects, empowering themselves and their staff to do what was best for their schools and students.

**Vortex Leadership**

The following conceptual framework synthesizes leadership qualities I initially found within my review of the literature and subsequently added to from my findings. I learned through my interviews with superintendents, principals, and teachers that these leadership styles were not categorical; instead they were as fluid as leaders changed and evolved over time with the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in each leadership role. Perhaps the vortex leader is simply the leader who constantly evolves and learns new ways of navigating and using her circumstances proactively.

*Figure 2* illustrates how I visualize the possible intersection of leadership styles as they culminate to produce Vortex Leadership. Vortex Leadership is made up of best qualities of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, social justice leadership, and management. The framework is descriptive in nature and is based upon the roles and practices elucidated within the Review of Literature and interviews with the principals and participants in my study. Embedded in each of the styles are the leadership practices and goals that later became the basis for my leadership style findings. As such, they are not definitive, but represent what I saw as the salient findings of each leadership style in this study.
Figure 2. The vortex leadership framework

Around the principal swirl the larger forces that affect their job responsibilities and ability to fulfill them. To navigate the larger forces, principals apply different leadership roles and responsibilities. At the center of the vortex are the qualities which appeared to enable effective school leaders to manage people and the changes asked of them, to lead instructionally, to share their leadership, and to improve equity in their schools. Inside this center vortex principals use cultural responsiveness, social savviness,
and accountability policy to drive desired changes were practices. It was from the vortex that effective school principals relaxed and were most able to impact their situational currents to, among other responsibilities, manage their staffs’ affective states, improve teaching and learning, lead staff through significant changes, and increase equity and access to learning. They accomplished these responsibilities more adeptly when they used the vortex to forge cultural responsiveness, social savvy, and when they linked their own desired changes to accountability requirements.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the methods I used to collect and analyze my data. Because I sought to understand the day-to-day job-related experiences of school principals and what was important to them, I used a phenomenological interview-based approach. This qualitative approach allowed me to better capture the nuances of participants’ attitudes, tones of voice, and beliefs than a quantitative methodology may have. As I sought to understand how NCLB and Arizona Learns impacted principals’ job responsibilities, their autonomy, and ability to implement socially just practices in their schools, I also sought to understand how these leaders made sense of their experiences as principals. Additionally, I designed questions to get at what was important to the principals, what they wanted to change, which obstacles they faced and how they responded to these obstacles.

To conduct my interviews, I applied Seidman’s (2006) in-depth phenomenological interviewing structure, which consists of three 90-minute interviews: The Focused Life History, The Details of the Experience, and Reflection of the Meaning. To avoid straining principals’ already demanding schedule, I modified this structure to conduct two 90-minute interviews with each principal. The first interview covered a focused education, leadership history, and details of the experience. The second interview adhered to Seidman’s third interview focus, Reflection on the Meaning, which I used to ask participants to focus on how their leadership and educational experiences interacted to bring the principals to their current position (p. 18). In addition, I borrowed from
Brenner’s (2006) semi-structured interview protocol of core questions and subsequent follow-up questions to attempt to use each participant’s own personal vocabulary within my follow-up questions. For instance, where one principal described his leadership as being like a chameleon, I asked him follow up questions using the word *chameleon*. I also tailored the beginnings of the second principal interview according topics we had discussed in the first interview in order to provide a connection between the two interviews.

The qualitative interview format allowed me flexibility to build upon participants’ responses and customize additional questions based upon what individual principals focused on or appeared particularly passionate about. In addition, I was able to ask follow up questions that referred to details the principal or superintendent had mentioned in earlier interviews. This flexibility also allowed me to delve deeper into comments that participants downplayed or expressed with hesitation, sarcasm, or other emotive phrasings. As I listened, I was able to take notes and write down questions or clarifications needed and to follow up on areas of interest to my study.

In phenomenological inquiry, the researcher seeks to describe, interpret and critically self-reflect upon a topic of interest (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Phenomenological interviewing asks participants to “reconstruct” their experience within a topic of interest and then to reflect upon the meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). When participants reflected on the meaning of their experiences, they articulated how different factors interacted in their lives which resulted in their present experiences. Because I asked principals to describe the nature of their experience as principals, how they came to be principals, and how they chose to lead their schools
within the context of state and federal accountability, phenomenological interviewing was an apt methodology.

**The Research Context**

This study was conducted in the metropolitan Phoenix area during the 2010-2011 school year. All superintendent and principal interviews were conducted at the end of the school year or during the summer following the school year. Most of the teachers were interviewed during the summer of 2011, but because of the timing of the teacher interviews falling over the summer break, a handful of teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the following school year.

Two large greater metropolitan Phoenix school districts participated in the study. The Prometheus School District served approximately 25,000 students, and the Argus School District served 35,600 students during the study year. The Prometheus School District identified itself as urban while the Argus School District, although located in a largely suburban area, contained schools in its attendance boundaries that lay in “urban cluster” areas, as noted by the 2010 Census website (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Argus was rated with an “A” grade by the State Board of Education, and Prometheus was rated with a “C.”

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6 Not the district’s name. All district and participant names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

7 Urban clusters (UCs) are populated by at least 2,500 people but less than 50,000 people.
Table 1

*Student Demographics of the School Districts Studied*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>% F/R Lunch</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Graduation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argus</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prometheus</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The districts were selected for two reasons. First, they comprised a range of school and student characteristics, spanning suburban to urban schools serving students from affluent homes to refugee students living in poverty. I hoped to study how principals leading different school populations responded to their schools’ challenges and students’ needs. Secondly, I had open access to both districts. I worked in one of the districts and was granted access to the second through my graduate school connections. The three schools I studied from each district were selected by virtue of the selection process and participation of their principals, which I describe in more detail below.

**Participants**

**Superintendents**

Once I obtained permission from the two school districts to conduct my research, I was granted interviews with each of the districts’ superintendents. The purpose of interviewing the superintendents of each district was twofold: first, the superintendents’ responses helped to advance my research design in that they recommended the pool of principals from whom I would select participants. This recommendation opened doors for
me as well. Recruiting busy school principals for two 90-minute interviews was not an enviable task. Because I was able to frame their potential participation as superintendent-referred “effective” principals, I felt more confident in asking for the principals’ time. Second, the superintendents’ own interview responses introduced me to the values, vision, and goals of each district from the superintendent’s perspective. Furthermore, in asking superintendents for their recommendations of “effective” principals and rationales for selecting the principals they selected, I was be able to compare the leadership qualities that superintendents valued with the leadership qualities the principals stated were important in their leadership.

The superintendent of the Prometheus School District, Dr. Lumen, was in his third year of leading the district when I interviewed him. Before leading in Prometheus, he had served as a superintendent in another district for five years. Dr. Lumen, had received his bachelor’s degree in teaching and his masters degree in counseling before earning his doctorate. Prior to becoming a superintendent, he had been a high school teacher and counselor, then assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent.

Two superintendents were interviewed for the Argus School District. One had recently left the district and one had just begun the superintendency. I interviewed both Drs. August and Klein during the summer of 2010 because both leaders knew the district and its principals and could speak to the challenges and issues the district faced. Both superintendent participants from Argus were had begun their careers as high school teachers. Dr. August had 25 years of superintendent experience: 17 as an assistant superintendent and eight as a superintendent. Dr. Klein had 20 years of principal
leadership experience and three years of associate superintendent experience at the time I interviewed her.

**Principals**

Within the sample of principals recommended, I focused on high school principals because one of the districts did not have any elementary schools from which to select principals. Without the larger pool of two districts’ principals to choose from, I would not have been able to protect the identity of the elementary school principals. The high school principal sampling was purposefully designed to select principals who had at least three years of experience as principals, who represented both genders and different racial groups, and who were considered “effective” by their superintendents. I selected experienced principals because my review of literature revealed that experienced principals were more apt to exercise greater autonomy in school decision making (Haynes & Licata, 1995; Papa & Baxter, 2008). I selected an equal number of male and female principals in order to have both genders well represented. I strove to select a racially diverse group of principals, but I was somewhat unsuccessful because I was limited by the number of high school principals in each district who met the experience criteria and who were recommended as effective. Of those who were recommended and who met the criteria from both districts, I first selected one minority and then three female principals. The remaining White male principals were selected to even out the male/female participation in each district (see Table 2). I was very fortunate that each principal I invited to participate in my study accepted and became one of my study participants.
Table 2

*The Principals and Their Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>AYP met?</th>
<th>2010-2011 AZ Learns Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knight</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Argus</td>
<td>Carl Sagan High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Highly performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alameda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Argus</td>
<td>Betty Makoni High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Highly performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparrow</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Argus</td>
<td>Aung San Suu Kyi High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Excelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shields</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Prome-thesus</td>
<td>Paul Farmer High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharp</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Prome-thesus</td>
<td>Paul Watson High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Performing plus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hart</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Prome-thesus</td>
<td>Esther Chaves Cano High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Performing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teachers**

From the principals’ recommendations of teacher leaders, I chose three teachers from each principal’s list of eight to ten teachers to represent both genders and a variety of content areas and interests. For instance, I strove to include teachers of special education students, the fine arts, English, math, science, social studies, night school teachers, and counselors. Eighteen teachers total participated. By their nature as teacher leaders, these teachers proved to be knowledgeable regarding their schools’ goals and challenges. Most of the teachers had served with their principals in some capacity on leadership teams or as department chairs. The purpose for including teachers in the
interview design was to offer corroborating or disconfirming evidence of what principals stated was true of their leadership and goals. In addition, the teachers’ responses filled in gaps and produced details that had been omitted by principals. In a couple of rare occasions, the teachers interviewed were alluded to by the principals in their responses, allowing me to hear both parties’ perspectives of an incident or anecdote involving both.

Table 3

*Teacher Participants by School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl Sagan High School</td>
<td>Ashton</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bowers</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Makoni High School</td>
<td>Alkine</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maddow</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benson</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aung San Suu Kyi High School</td>
<td>Albury</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benes</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cordova</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Farmer High School</td>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bersky</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casteno</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Watson High School</td>
<td>Albers</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benchot</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carres</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther Chaves Cano High School</td>
<td>Aster</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baxter</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corbin</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Design

As described in the participant section, this qualitative study was conducted in three phases with three groups of interviewees: First, I interviewed superintendents from both districts. Then I interviewed six principals from three high schools in each district. Finally, I interviewed three teachers from each of the principals’ schools. I digitally recorded each interview, took notes during the interviews to help me formulate additional questions, and used a professional transcription service to transcribe each interview.

The interview questions for each phase of participants were designed to address my three research questions from the perspectives of each group. For instance, superintendents were asked to identify district foci, challenges, and the qualities of effective leaders; principals were asked to identify school foci, challenges, and how they addressed these challenges; and teachers were asked to identify school foci, challenges, and how their leaders addressed these challenges [see Appendix]. In order to avoid questions that led participants to a preset conclusion, I used synonyms for possibly loaded terms such as autonomy and accountability. For instance, instead of using the term, autonomy, I asked principals what was in their control and what was beyond their control. Instead of using accountability, I asked participants about Arizona Learns and NCLB specifically. In addition, I strove to structure questions neutrally to avoid leading participants to a specific conclusion.

Brenner (2006) recommended that researchers frame longer interview questions for semi-structured interviews instead of shorter interview questions, which may signal to respondents that short responses are expected. As a result, my principal interview questions were intentionally long for the first questions to establish a leisurely pace of
questions and answers. I hoped that this structure would allow participants time to think before they answered and to encourage elaboration. In contrast, teacher questions were more directed and precise because they served to corroborate or contradict what principals had said.

**Participant Selection**

The superintendents identified five to eight “effective” high school principals within their districts, of whom I selected three (six total) based upon gender, race, and minimum years of experience required for my research design. At the culmination of the principal interviews, the principals provided the names of 8-10 teachers with whom they had worked closely and whom they felt could elaborate upon the principals’ leadership style and priorities. From this pool of teachers, I selected three from each school, who represented different content areas, roles, and genders.

I then utilized *Atlas.ti*, a qualitative analysis software, to code and draw conclusions as themes emerged from the transcripts. A more detailed, in-depth description of my procedures follows.

**Analysis of Responses**

I began coding transcripts when the superintendent phase of interviews was complete. Studying the superintendent interviews allowed me to formulate additional questions and foci for the principal interviews. However, I did not code the principal interviews before I conducted the teacher interviews because, in most cases, the scope of the principal responses was lengthy and the time frame between principal and teacher response was briefer. However, I was able to reread the principal transcripts before I
conducted the teacher interviews in order to focus the discussion on aspects the principals had stated were important to them.

To code the transcripts, I used Seidman’s (2006) suggested coding and analysis procedure in his chapter, “Analyzing, Interpreting, and Sharing Interview Material.” Specifically, as Seidman suggested, I looked for “connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories” that were possible themes (p. 125). Although I used Atlas.ti to work with the data on computer, I also worked with hard copies, as Seidman recommended. I gave each transcript a first read on paper, highlighting any research question related in three colors. For instance, any part of the responses that addressed job responsibilities was highlighted in yellow, any content that addressed accountability or autonomy⁸ was highlighted in pink, and any mention of social justice that fit my social justice definition was highlighted in blue. In addition, with black pen, I annotated anything of interest that lay outside of my three research questions, anything I needed to go back to the audio recording to listen to, and my own reflective thoughts and questions. This structure was comfortable for me, having been an English teacher who taught students to closely read texts for word choice, figurative language, and sentence fluency. It allowed me to think aloud on the hard copies and to interact with the content initially before I formally coded it in the computer. I found that this method broke down some of my hesitation to code information more formally in Atlas.ti.

Within Atlas.ti, I began coding each transcript with key words from my research questions. For instance, I began with the codes, accountability, autonomy, responsibilities, and social justice. Then new codes became necessary to capture more

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⁸ I later separated these into their own categories within the computer coding process.
subtle shades of meaning, contrasting information, and relationships which began to
emerge. I added subcodes such as “important to principal, students focused upon,
principal: likes, and principal experience shapes leadership. To address my conceptual
framework of leadership styles, I created codes for leadership: managerial, leadership:
instructional, leadership: transformational, and leadership: social justice. However, I
also freely added qualities of leadership that emerged unforeseen by my review of the
literature. For instance, the codes leadership: collaborative and leadership: transparent
found their way into my coding list. I ultimately reconciled these codes as qualities of
leadership: transformational and created links to this parent code. In addition, as
leadership: savvy grew in importance and number of occurrences, I ended up recognizing
it as a significant finding. Furthermore, the tentative code, leadership: responsive,
ultimately gave birth to the finding regarding culturally responsive leadership.

When certain words or phrases were used by more than one participant, I added
them to my code list. For example, I added advisory to address a district focus that
appeared throughout all three groups of participants in Prometheus. When I noticed a
term used across both districts, I coded it, for instance, teacher union. Then codes for
each participant group became helpful, so I added, superintendent: district challenges,
principal: school challenges, and teacher: school challenges and so forth. I later learned
that I could achieve this comparative function by creating families within my primary
documents and code lists, but I found that coding these initially in my code list helped me
organize my codes visually and made the dropdown menu in Atlas.ti more user friendly.

I did ultimately use the family tool for output purposes and created families that
encompassed common traits in the participants, such as all superintendents, all principals,
all teachers, all Paul Watson school, all Prometheus District, and so on. Then I was able
to select a family for which to print all responses to selected codes, which was very
helpful when looking across participants within a common grouping.

Following Rossman and Rallis’ (2003) suggestion that qualitative researchers
remain open to “the unexpected [to] let the analytic direction of the study emerge” (p. 274), I remained open to letting my findings inform the analysis of my research. As a result, I discovered two types of autonomy within my data that had not been discovered in my Review of Literature. I coded these *autonomy derived from funding* and *autonomy derived from making AYP*.

As, I looked for affirming evidence from each group’s responses or of individual principals’ responses, I also noted contradictory information and added memos to each quote that contradicted the information that had been given to me by a participant. In addition, I created codes that addressed the contradictory nature of some factors, such as *accountability: positive*, *accountability: negative*, *accountability: internal*, and *accountability: external*.

**Participant Check**

As a form of member checking, I submitted my dissertation draft with my preliminary findings to the principals I had interviewed so that they could check my finding for accuracy and identity masking. This proved beneficial as one of the principals noted the inaccuracy of one of her teacher’s interpretations of the district transfer policy, which in turn caused me to change my findings regarding that school’s autonomy regarding staffing. In addition, two of the principals expressed appreciation for the study which they felt validated their struggles and work.
Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study is limited to principals of schools in a metropolitan city in Arizona. The principals’ perceptions may or may not be generalizable to principals in other states or to principals of rural schools. Although I strove for diversity of race and gender within my sample of participants, my sample of six principals included only one non-white principal; therefore, their experiences and perceptions may not represent the majority of principals. In addition, I am studying principals from two school districts: one urban and one suburban which may not represent all urban or suburban districts. The teachers who were recommended to me were recommended by virtue of their involvement in leadership on their campus; therefore, they do not necessarily represent teachers who were less involved or knowledgeable. Some were administratively certified but continued to teach.

Finally, this study was conducted during 2010-2011, a period of transition between the original implementation of NCLB and the revised version of the legislation. As a result, findings from this study reflect a particular point in time and may not be generalizable to the future depending on the extent to which key features of the law are changed.

The Researcher

I came to this study with twenty years of teaching in public schools informing my values and biases. As a result, I had to systematically retrain my thinking and my language to see with new eyes and to try to replace subjectivity with neutrality and objectivity. As I began the study, during the review of the literature, particularly, I realized that I was reading with an activist’s mind. What I read made me indignant. I had
to refocus on reporting findings instead of arguing against policies. However, I evolved over the course of the study to be an “observer,” rather than an activist. I do not know that I successfully remained neutral during every stage of the process, but I adhered to my intent to conduct valid research that conveyed what was really going on in schools. Surprisingly, while I expected to have to fight my reactions to what participants told me during interviews, I found that I was so riveted by their stories that I was able to stay in the present moment and to truly listen.

Part of my transition from angry activist to scholarly researcher occurred because I was hired as an assistant principal in a high school during the time I was collecting teachers’ responses regarding their principals’ leadership. Thus, I became part of the phenomenon I was studying. Perhaps it was seeing behind the curtain firsthand that also helped to temper my indignation. It is harder to criticize when one is part of the machine.

Another limitation to my objectivity was that my new position as assistant principal was within one of the schools I had studied. I had already collected my principal data before I was hired in the school, but I had not interviewed the teachers yet. To counteract the pressure the teachers may have felt to agree to be participants, I put out the request to only those teachers whom I did not evaluate, and I scheduled the interviews before any evaluations cycles began. Still, I am sure that some of the teachers’ responses were influenced by my position as their new assistant principal. There was probably some counter-transference, as well. Because they had trusted me enough to talk to me, I felt even more obligated to protect them from any repercussions that could come to them from sharing their story. I was careful not to reveal their roles as participants with my principal and co-workers. In addition, I felt I knew these teachers better than any going
into the school year, and caught myself addressing problems they had brought up in the interviews as the year progressed.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS PART 1—JOB RESPONSIBILITIES, AUTONOMY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

As stated in Chapter 1, my study examined in detail the impact, if any, of accountability policies on principal job responsibilities, autonomy, and ability to pursue social justice in their schools. This chapter is organized in terms of the three research questions I posed in Chapter 1. First, I report the impact of AZ Learns and No Child Left Behind on principals’ job responsibilities. Next, I examine the degree to which these policies affect the principals’ perceived and actual autonomy exerted in their schools. Finally, I present my findings regarding whether or not AZ Learns and No Child Left Behind have impeded or assisted principals in their ability to advance social justice within their schools.

Within each research question, I examine and relay the predominant findings reflected across the three groups of participants: superintendents, principals, and teachers. While I might have examined each group’s responses to each question in isolation, I found it more powerful to integrate teacher and superintendent responses with principal responses as corroboration of principals’ experiences. And while the teachers’ voices provided me with valuable perspectives of the principals’ leadership styles and foci, I found it necessary to carefully select only the responses that served to elucidate or contradict the principals’ stated behaviors and foci. Therefore, the teachers’ voices serve to foreground the principals’ voices. In the following pages, I present my findings as themes which ran throughout all groups interviewed, centering heavily on principals’ responses.
In addition, I did not conduct a comparative analysis of gender or race within the findings. While this comparison might be a valuable course for future research, my principal sample was limited in racial diversity, and my interview questions did not garner substantial data on principal gender differences.

**Principals’ Accountability-Related Job Responsibilities**

Both superintendents and principals noted that the job responsibilities required of the high school principal had increased in magnitude and time required to fulfill them since AZ Learns and NCLB were in force. Participants commented on the many and varied job responsibilities of the principal, from conducting staff and student discipline, to planning for community outreach, to maintaining school safety. However, within the scope of my study, I chose to focus on those responsibilities that increased as a result of external accountability policies. Three areas of increased responsibility as a result of accountability policy were (a) increased work hours, (b) pressure to effect greater student achievement, and (c) the necessity of managing school staffs’ affective states related to AZ Learns and NCLB. Managing staffs’ affective states was necessary when breaking bad news to a school staff in the case of receiving a failing rating or when asking staff to make significant changes to curriculum or procedures because of the deficient rating.

**Increased Work Hours and Paperwork**

Three of the principals provided evidence that the job of principal was extensively demanding of their time inside and outside of the school day. Regarding added accountability responsibilities, principals tended to add more hours rather than cut anything else out of their schedule. This work schedule came at the cost of their private
lives or health. For instance, Principal Sparrow explained why she did not take many vacation days:

> It's an incredible amount of work and you—a normal week is 70 to 80 hours plus what you do at home. And at home it's probably another 15 to 20 hours. [It's just an incredible amount of time and a lot of stress. . . . Keep in mind, you get three weeks' vacation money in there, three weeks' vacation time which you can never take because you get too far behind.

When he took a vacation, Principal Knight noted that he made a point to remain accessible to his school. He still answered his messages and returned calls. He recounted an occasion of doing so while on vacation in Spain and the resulting boost in parent confidence he received by remaining accessible:

> The expectations are that you are accessible 24/7/365. And that’s not an exaggeration. I travel abroad every other year staying in Morocco, Spain, and every day I find I am at an Internet Café to check in. And checking in on my phone and being in contact. I mean that’s the expectation and no one ever says that. I mean not really anywhere, but I’ve found out you can save a whole lot of angst and issues by being responsive, even if you are not fixing something or solving something. Like when I was in Spain last summer, I got this parent thing, and I can’t even remember what it was. It wasn’t anything major but because I responded, and they saw that I was in Spain on vacation. That really helped in a lot of other ways. And all of a sudden, your credibility is off the charts. I mean, the parents think, “This guy is on vacation, and he’s out of the country, yet he responded to my basic questions. Wow this is a great school!” So little things pay off with residuals.

In this case, being accessible was seen by Principal Knight as positive with positive repercussions. On the other hand, Principal Hart, identified his work hours as partially responsible for his health concerns and declining appearance:

> I've gotten fat and out of shape because I don't take enough time to exercise. I'll look at the clock and it will be 8:00 at night and I'll still be working here, you know. So I work, work, work, work, work, work, work, work, work because I want to help the people so much, but I do so little to take care of myself. So I have to be able to do a better job of taking care of myself. I was looking at a picture of my passport that I had. I’ve now been in administration for ten years and it wears you out. In ten years I can’t believe how much I’ve aged. I was in really good shape, really thin
in good shape you know and looked like I had a lot of energy and, man, ten years later my passport picture. . . I’m like “golly, I sure have gotten fat and gray in ten years.” It’s really hard you know.

This finding aligns with the literature on principals’ schedules and the negative toll their workaholic lifestyle can take on them physically and emotionally (Thompson, 2003). Principal Hart’s superintendent, Dr. Lumen was aware of his principals’ demanding job and noted the need for protecting them from having a splintered focus:

The urban high school principalship is an extremely taxing and stressful and demanding job. I had a principal who retired a little while ago. He was excellent. I said, “Tell me a little about your decision.” He says, “It’s that this job is just relentless.” He says, “I love it. But it takes me 45 minutes to go from here, 50 yards because I’m dealing with everyone else’s crisis.” After awhile it’s kind of like, you know, these people—they’re human beings, too. So, we have to set up systems by which we can insulate them and protect them so that they can focus on the right the things.

In the Argus school district, Superintendent Klein acknowledged the increased workload principals were asked to complete. However, she attributed the retention of the principals in the district to principals liking a challenge:

I think [principals] find themselves on overload with expectations for the numbers of teachers they evaluate because they are for the most part a group of people who are sort of Type A personalities and they want to do this incredibly good job and they’re really, really on overload. . . I think the amount of work and the high expectations we have in this district for principals is challenging but I also know that that’s why most of them are here. They like the challenge.

Accountability-related paperwork was cited by three of the principals as an area of increased responsibility. Principals were responsible for planning for and administering state testing and then for sharing test data with their stakeholders. Principal Sparrow noted the need for attention to detail:

[T]he hours of preparation even on the testing: it’s hours upon hours upon hours to make sure the schedule, just dong the schedule, time schedule, is a mess with 2,400 kids. Where are you putting who, where, when? Okay, this [student] has
accommodations. This one doesn't. Do we have a teacher, an aide in the room to take care of this [student]? All of that kind of stuff is huge, and then you have to make sure you order the right number of tests. Do you have the big print for the student who has to see the big print? Do you have somebody to read the test to the blind student? Oh, but wait, district decided they didn't want to test the blind student, but the blind student wants to take the test, so you need to get the test for the blind student even though district doesn't want the blind student to take the test. There's all these little snafus like that. And then let alone do we have the—what do you call them, the interventions for the kids? Okay, but wait, we don't have money anymore for interventions because we decided that all interventions should be put into the elementary school.

In addition, principals were responsible for knowing and sharing their school’s data on several metrics, including state testing. In the Argus School District, Principal Knight described some of the school data he was responsible for knowing and sharing with his stakeholders:

We—each school—has a score card, a data score card which just goes along with the strategic plans. And, oh my gosh, there are eight pages of different categories and goals. There’s just so much data. I mean, it’s great. So yeah, we are very conscious of our [data].

In the Prometheus School District, Principal Sharp noted that her students were given 28 standardized tests per school year, which provided her and her staff 28 sets of data to examine. Teachers also noted the presence of data-focused discussions centered around test scores and AYP, which I discuss further in the findings on principal leadership styles.

The Pressure to Achieve

It was clear in both districts, and among all interview groups that student achievement was a critical principal job responsibility. The onus for improving the school’s test scores, and thus, the school’s performance label, fell largely on the principal. In the Argus district, Superintendent August articulated a key principal responsibility as “the pressure to achieve,” noting that “the principal has to have that
pressure to achieve for the whole school.” In the same district, Superintendent Klein, acknowledged a problem with external accountability while at the same time, acknowledging its permanence in education:

I think what we have to accept is that accountability is here to stay. We need to embrace it. Not fight it. Be part of how we measure student growth and what it means to measure student growth. You know, not let someone else define that for us. And, that hasn’t really happened. We still are being told how things work by folks that maybe aren’t as knowledgeable as they should be about student development and learning. I mean, one test shouldn’t be our measure.

While some district leadership might downplay the importance of the state test scores philosophically, student achievement nevertheless came down to the state test scores, and those scores were the indicators of a school’s success or failure. Principal Sparrow noted this paradox:

When you have an administrator higher up than you say, “Well, it's just one test,” you say, “Well it's just one test, but you put it out everywhere—for ‘just one test.’” Then we had another administrator who went down in scores, and the entire year, every meeting, it was brought up. “What are you doing to bring up the scores to this ‘just one test’?”

Principal Sparrow’s recognition of the importance of the AIMS test is reflected in her school’s focus on the test. Mr. Benes, a teacher at Aung San Suu Kyi High School identified student achievement as a whole campus focus:

Another priority without a doubt is academic excellence relative to testing procedures, AIMS being specific. We go after that, really pretty hard, you know, across the campus. Also in terms of identifying shortcomings relative to student knowledge gaps and how, you know, how we take care of the knowledge gaps as a complete campus.

Also in the Argus district, Ms. Bowers, a teacher at Carl Sagan High School, noted the importance of student achievement but qualified student achievement as that which transcended achievement on AIMS:
I think it's improvement, but it's student achievement-related improvement. It's not just improvement for improvement's sake. It's “What are we doing to improve the end, the outcomes, for students?” That's probably more important than anything else. We're very outcome driven, and we want to see the students be more successful, whether it's in test scores or just in meeting their needs for lifelong learners, that kind of thing. It's real outcome driven. That's very important for our leaders.

In the Prometheus District, two Paul Farmer High School teachers expounded the importance of making AYP on their campus. For instance, when asked what was important to Principal Shields, Mrs. Abraham stated. “Meeting AYP, AIMS, and anything that raises test scores along with student graduation rates are most important.”

Mr. Casteno, another Farmer teacher, reiterated this focus:

One of the major priorities on our campus is making AYP. And I still don't know where we stand for this past year, but we didn't make it if I recall last year and maybe the year prior to that. And it's been, you know, it's stressful and it's just all “Pass the AIMS!” “Pass the AIMS!” “Do well on the AIMS test.” So that then comes down to trying to do well on standardized tests. That's a huge priority.

Also in the Prometheus school district, Chaves Cano High School’s Mr. Baxter tied the importance of student achievement to students being able to go to college:

“Student achievement, you know, of course is our number one goal of the school—to raise student achievement and to ensure the students are getting what they need in the classroom so that they can be successful in college.” On a similar note, Ms. Carres, a teacher at Paul Watson High School, expressed the expectation for student achievement on her campus, but it was not student achievement limited to AIMS scores:

I think what’s important to [Principal Sharp] is student achievement first and foremost. I think she wants our teachers to be invested in what we do at Paul Watson High to strengthen our school and how to help our students and the community at large. I think it’s important to her that teachers take the job seriously but also enjoy themselves.
Managing School Staff Affective States

A related accountability policy responsibility that some principals assumed was mitigating the pressure to achieve by shielding their schools’ teachers from increased work and negative accountability labels. First, principals consciously protected teachers from some of the mandated directives that originated either in the state department or their district office. Two principals in the Argus district acknowledged this need. Principal Alameda stated that she had to reduce some of the workload from teachers to manage their psychological states:

Sometimes I find that I have to filter through some of the directives to make it either easier or more understandable for the teachers. And, if there’s something that my [administrative] staff can do to take some of that off the plate of the teachers, then we do it. I see that as the role of administration: that we take as much off the plate of the teacher as we can so that they’re not bogged down with minutia.

Principal Sparrow also remarked that she had tried to reduce teacher stress and workload by removing some of the workload from teachers’ plates:

The amount of paperwork that we have to put onto teachers is unbelievable. We can't just let teachers hone their craft. They have to not only hone their craft; they have to give us an unbelievable amount of paperwork that we have to in turn pass up the hill. And we try to pull as much as we can away from teachers, but there's only so much we can.

In contrast to reducing teacher overload in the Argus district, principals in the Prometheus district had a different kind of affective state to manage with their school staffs. Theirs was the need to mitigate the negativity that a failing label incurred, particularly for staff who had worked hard to make AYP but who had failed. Two Prometheus principals were frustrated that although their schools had progressed and student achievement had increased, that they were still seen as failing and in “corrective
action.” They, in turn, had the additional responsibility of shaping this message for their staffs in order to salvage staff morale regarding what they considered a demeaning label.

Principal Shields described his responsibility to explain the paradox to his staff:

“You grew 10%, but you didn't make AYP because two subgroups of your entire sophomore class didn't: your special education students and your ESL students.” So the entire staff has to hear that news that even though our entire sophomore class, as an entire collective group, all of our African American subgroups, our Hispanics, our Hispanic females, did grow in mathematics and reading and writing, no problem. We did hit our graduation rate. But because of the special education population and because of the ESL population, we are not allowed to make AYP, and we shift into corrective action. The hardest part about that is the mixed message, and managing that mixed message with the staff, and continually telling the staff, “You're doing exceptional work. Our kids are learning. And it's not our kids that are the problem; it's the measure that's the problem.”

Principal Hart also led his school through corrective action. When asked if his school had made AYP, he noted the confounding factors associated with failure despite success:

Okay, we're in corrective action, but yet that's the—so we're in corrective action for NCLB, but in Arizona Learns we're Performing Plus. So that's very confusing for people. How can you be Performing Plus but be in corrective action? And you know, so people think, “Well, if you're in corrective action; that must mean you're still broken.” And it's not. Our graduation rates are one of the highest graduation rates in the state. We have a good graduation rate. Our attendance rates are very good. Our absence rate is very low.

Mr. Baxter, a teacher at Chaves Cano High School, echoed Principal Hart’s frustration and exhibited a keen understanding of the paradoxical nature of the state’s accountability overlaid upon federal accountability:

There are lots of interventions in place to help students pass their classes and prepare for college, but students are not passing their AIMS tests. There is a disconnect between student learning and passing the tests. Fifty students did not graduate because they could not pass AIMS; therefore, we did not make our AYP. But we went from 200 students not passing AIMS to 50 students not passing AIMS. We decreased the number of students not passing the test, but we still did not make AYP.
In addition to managing their school staffs’ affective states regarding workload and school labels, principals noted that a key responsibility was managing their staffs’ responses to significant accountability-related changes in curriculum, policies, and processes. Managing school-wide change in itself was a formidable task, which I examine further in the findings on leadership styles in Chapter 5. As far as changes stemming from accountability policy, there is some evidence that the principals framed their school changes as necessary to improve their performance and thus to meet their accountability goals. For instance, the two Prometheus schools in corrective action implemented new curricula and instituted an extra class advisory period one or more days a week to increase student achievement. Principal Shields explained his reasoning for implementing Advisory:

So this year I was trying to get a lot of buy-in for a lot of the advisory period initiative, where we looked at some of the higher performing schools in other parts of the valley. They give their kids rigor and then they give their kids the gift of time. So built into every kids’ schedule, in places like [excelling school] in places like [excelling school], there are prep periods for kids, advisory periods where, not only is it time to do their homework, but it’s also time for them to get passes and take advantage of campus resources; they need to go see their counselor to work out a personal statement. They need information on a scholarship. They need to go to the media center to print something out for their English class. They need to do some internet research, or they just need to do work. Or there’s some kids that might be held back in the advisory and not travel anywhere because the advisory teacher needs to address some attendance issues. It sounds logical right?

Despite the logical-sounding nature of this implementation, Principal Shields had to skillfully negotiate with his staff and teachers’ union to institute the extra period in the day.
In addition, the schools in corrective action were required to increase the rigor of their curricula to address their student achievement deficiencies. The principal and staff of Chaves Cano High School chose a new curriculum program to address this requirement. Principal Hart acknowledged the challenge that he had before him in helping some teachers adopt the change:

The other day I went into a social studies teacher's class, and for an activity, she had a map of Mexico and the kids were putting in the names of the states of Mexico. And I thought, “No, that's for third grade kids to do!” So we're going to continue to take a big step up, and institutionally it's going to take some time, and I'm going to do it as compassionate and as nice as I can, but it's going to be difficult. It's going to take blood, sweat and tears, but it is going to take growth. It's going to take hard conversations for some folks. Some folks won't want to do certain things.

Principal Hart also had to manage some of his staff’s fear of school closure. In a strategic move, he framed the school’s curricular and structural changes as defensive moves against the federal or state government’s closing of Chaves Cano High School:

Here's what I told the staff: “If the federal government comes back and says, ‘I guess you guys are still in corrective action, and we're going to close you. The local government says it's going to close you.’ We have a strong case not to close us because we haven't sat on our hands. We're the first institution to bring in Zenith. We've created an advisory. We have an evening program. We've put [Excelling Program] across the strategies.”

In general, principals used accountability policies to drive positive changes to their school structure, services for students, and curricula. In a sense, these policies bolstered their ability to rationalize and sell change to their staffs, whether the changes were due to accountability policy or not. Such strategic use of policy to drive desired changes is a feature of Vortex Leadership, which I discuss more in Chapter 5.

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9 Not the actual name of the curriculum. All names of curriculum and programs have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participating schools and districts.
Principal Autonomy Within Accountability Policy

There was little to no evidence that AZ Learns or NCLB directly reduced principals’ autonomy. In fact, state and federal accountability policies appeared to have assisted some of the principals in making changes they had wished to make in their schools prior to corrective action or pressure to achieve higher test scores.

Principals’ autonomy was limited instead by other factors not directly related to state and federal accountability policies. The accountability mechanisms that most limited principals’ autonomy originated within their own district office or school governance structure. These included, in the Argus District, rigid bell schedules tied to the district’s transportation needs and the district’s control of federal funds. In the Prometheus School District, limitations included the negotiated agreement with the teachers’ union and unwieldy numbers of feeder schools.

There were, however, two unanticipated accountability-related autonomy phenomena in my findings. The first unexpected phenomenon, which I called “Autonomy Derived from Funding,” was primarily experienced by the three principals in Title I high schools. Principals who led Title I schools reported increased funding to acquire extra resources and programs to serve their students. The second phenomenon, which I called “Trust-Related Autonomy,” was only evident in the Prometheus district. Both types of autonomy are examined in greater detail at the end of this section. First, I present the findings regarding the scope of principals’ autonomy as described by the six principals in my study.
Principals’ Autonomy

In general, all six principals identified several areas over which they had sufficient control—or autonomy—within their own schools. In the Argus district, the three principals felt they had control over staffing, school budgeting, and school decisions. Principal Alameda expounded on the areas in which she felt she had control in leading Betty Makoni High School:

I think to a certain extent you have control over your staff—who is on your staff. You have control over courses. You have control over the facilities. You have control over quite a bit. I think the way that we do staffing is a lot more fluid [than other districts]. You get X number of [Full Time Employees] and then you can decide where you need those. The other districts that I went to, you got so many staff for social studies, so many for English, and you could not cross over. They staffed it that way, so it was very tight and there wasn’t a whole lot of flexibility. Where here, if I want to start a new program and I can squeeze some new staffing and not affect my bottom line [district is] okay with it. The bottom line is: you can’t ask for more staffing. Okay, but what you do within the boundaries, you know, is not illegal.

Principal Sparrow reiterated the freedom to hire the staff needed for one’s school in the Argus district. In addition, she called attention to having control over her school’s use of the money received to use at the school level:

[District] let[s] us hire who we want to hire because we check references and they pretty much let us hire them. They give us a certain amount of money and we have control over how we spend it. We don't have control over the amount of money that we get. But the money that we do get we have control over. The amount of money that we get from our dual enrollment—we have control over how that’s spent.

Principal Knight felt that he had a substantial amount of autonomy to control the grading practices at his school, specifically in implementing a new grading system that operated differently from other schools in the district:

I know we’re the lone runner out there with [the new grading system], which has rocked everybody’s world, and some nasty, violent kind of stuff is going on, but
we’re holding true and making our own path. . . We don’t use zeros, no more zeros. We separate effort from achievement. Effort is important, absolutely, it is critical. I’m not saying that it isn’t, but it has to be assessed separately and then we only grade some of the work. Everything that we do in the classroom is practice. So homework—that’s practice. So we just stopped calling it “homework” because [students] used to just cheat on their homework anyway. They would copy somebody else’s or whatever. They wouldn’t do it, and it was meaningless. So we just said, “We’re going to stop the madness.” When we stopped calling it “homework,” the kids started doing it. We said, “Well, we’ve got to practice” because they all understand the correlation between practice and games. “You can’t play the game unless you go to practice. If you don’t go to practice then you’re not in shape, and you won’t know the plays. So I can’t play you in the game. Well, I’m not going to have you take the summative assessment until you’ve shown me that you’ve done the practice. Why would I give you a test that you and I both now you’re going to fail?” So now the whole message is “Learn it.”

In the Prometheus district, principals described having similar levels of autonomy in making campus decisions to institute new curricula and to implement programs to serve the social and emotional well-beings of their students. Principal Hart described the new curriculum he and his staff chose to adopt for Esther Chaves Cano High School:

So we're the first institution in Arizona to bring in Zenith. And what that allows us then is that we have a wealth of algebra teachers and a wealth of resources to where our teachers then feel better supported. There's, you know, the highest scoring students in math in the world, who are from Singapore, and they teach Zenith curriculum. So our teachers that are now teaching algebra have access to those algebra Zenith teachers in Singapore and the algebra teachers in Germany. And our English teachers now have access to the Zenith English teachers in England. Those are key pieces.

At Paul Farmer High School, Principal Shields noted a similar autonomy to select and choose instructional programs he wanted to implement on his campus:

I love Prometheus because we have autonomy. And it's a site—it’s a site level administration. I have total control over the conditions for teaching and learning here. . .And one of the things I love most—if you haven't picked up that I'm most passionate about—is student support services. And creating and having total autonomy and creating intervention systems that in our school are absolutely crucial. We, as principals, we can take a look at different instructional models, and we can chose which ones we want on our campus. So I happen to be a fan of
the Cognition Program, okay, because I think that's—that one is done through Light Mark Behavioral Health. They'll come in and work with our people and facilitate on it, so we have that on this campus.

At Paul Watson High School, Principal Sharp was also able to implement a curriculum she wanted on her campus, the Think More Curriculum, which provided staff and students with benchmark and vocational data for each of the four years that students were in the school. However, Principal Sharp indicated that since each school in the Prometheus district was selecting its own curriculum and programs, the district might be providing schools with too much autonomy:

I think there is quite a bit of autonomy in this district. In fact, there are some that might say it is too much autonomy. Because we have sixteen schools, and when there was an evaluation that was done by the NCA, and they evaluated the district, they said there were really sixteen mini districts because we are doing our own thing.

This is not to say that principals in Prometheus had free range to do whatever they wished. Ms. Carres commented that Principal Sharp was having a hard time acquiring the technology she wanted for the school because of a district policy:

I know that at the district level equitability has become an issue with instructional technology. So, if one school wants this type of computer all the schools have to have it. Sharp’s having trouble now because she’s trying to order some Netbooks for our school. She wants to order 300 of them but the district is saying “We can’t let you do that because we want every school to be able to have that. If every school doesn’t have the budget for it, then we’re not sure we can approve it.”

Furthermore, Prometheus principals faced limitations to their autonomy in staffing policy with regard to the union agreement. The Prometheus Teachers’ Union exerted substantial limitations on Prometheus principals’ ability to manage their staffing, including hiring and restricting teacher absences, which I discuss more in the following section and chapter.
As noted earlier, all six principals articulated some district-level limitations to their autonomy. Both districts’ principals cited budget-related staffing cuts as difficult to work around. However, Argus principals cited scheduling and time structure rigidity as an obstacle to improving student achievement where Prometheus principals appeared to exercise greater influence in this area. In addition, only Prometheus principals voiced concerns over the inconsistency of student preparation from the many feeder schools they received students. All three Prometheus principals indicated that they wished they could better articulate their expectations and establish transition plans with their feeder schools, but as each high school drew from up to 40 feeder schools, this goal seemed formidable. Finally, Prometheus principals cited social issues, such as poverty and parent dysfunction as factors that were beyond their control. Each of these factors that principal felt were beyond their control is worthy of study, but to do so here would be beyond the scope of my research questions and study, which is to determine how formal external accountability policies in Arizona have affected principals’ level of autonomy.

**Autonomy Derived from Funding**

Although my findings do not suggest that the principals see their autonomy as diminished due to AZ Learns and NCLB, they do support the finding that these accountability policies have created some differences in principals’ levels of autonomy depending upon a school’s AYP status and funding level. For instance, Prometheus principals seemed to have higher levels of autonomy to institute new curricula and student support programs than did Argus principals. As illustrated earlier in this chapter, Prometheus principals had authority to select curricula, student support programs, and interventions, provided that their teachers supported their choices. In fact, two of the
principals were obligated to choose new school curricula and student-responsive interventions because their schools were in corrective action after failing to make AYP; however, they did have input into which curricula they wanted to choose. Principal Hart described some of the curricular and support programs he was able to enact in Esther Chaves Cano High School:

We've instituted advisory and Zenith and evening school. We've also built pathways here so when students enter, they can enter a pathway, and it's not like a narrow road where you fall off the cliff. It's like a freeway where there are lane changes because kids change lanes. You can go down the architectural road or the engineering road. . . . We're also getting off the ground an AA group for kids that are struggling with alcoholism, and you know, there's the ability to form different types of structures for kids that we didn't have because before advisory. We have a five-day advisory period now. . . . Now with advisory five days we have that period to where, well, every Thursday it's okay for you to go to your AA group. It's okay for you to, you know, go to your Staying Straight group.

Within the advisory period, which Principal Hart expanded to five days a week, students could choose from a number of support groups to attend during advisory time, from Alcoholics Anonymous to anger management.

Principal Shields, whose school was also in corrective action, implemented student programs that he viewed as responsive to students’ social and emotional needs, including a proactive attendance policy whereby students with attendance problems were identified and supported to keep them in school:

I get to create an attendance intervention system that convenes a whole group of adults in this school—that intervene on students after they miss the fourth day, and they're pulling those kids in. I get to oversee a Response to Intervention team that teachers campus-wide can forward names to, and they swarm over these kids and bring them in: “You have a behavior plan, and you're going to be turning in a day-to-day contract.” I mean our job is to create systems and programming that keep kids in school.
Principal Shields described his ability to use his school’s resources and Title I funding as he saw necessary. He implemented a remediation-based discipline policy to address student discipline incidents that might otherwise result in a student suspension or dropping out of school:

What if I kicked out every single kid that got in one fight, no tolerance, zero tolerance, what do you think would happen? If I didn't do what I do now: “You fight; you're going to go away for a couple days, but guess what, you're coming back. You're doing anger management. And the person you fought with? You're having a mediation, and you're signing a peace agreement.” If I didn't do that, and I just kicked everybody out, what's going to happen? My drug kids—if you're dealing, you're gone. If I catch you with a joint, if this was zero tolerance, what's going to happen? I'm going to kick you and your newly-developed addiction out the door. And what are you going to do in the community? Thieve and rob and feed your addition. What if I caught you with a joint and said, “You know what, you're going away for a couple days, but you're going to come back. You're going to give me a drug test, and you're going to anti-drug programming on Saturday because you're not going to miss school time to do it. You're going to show up here in the Community Room on Saturday, you're going to work with the Social Worker, and you're going to get your stuff done, and then we're going to put you back in school.” . . . Having the autonomy to create those systems, having the autonomy to take my Title I budget and say, “I want to use X amount of dollars to pay my Counselors and my Social Workers to run this Saturday programming, pay my intervention specialist, who is another Social Worker, to do anger management workshops, to pay my SPED psychologist to get out of that office and do anger management.” That's what the autonomy lets me do.

In contrast to Paul Farmer High School’s Title I-funded student response systems, Argus district’s Carl Sagan High School did not receive extra funding or staffing for student interventions. By all accounts, Carl Sagan High School was a Title I school: it served a majority of students in poverty and had a 62% transience rate. However, the district did not allow Carl Sagan to be labeled a Title I school in case it did not meet AYP, which would result in possible sanctions and a failing label. Principal Knight had asked the school board to fund a social worker for his campus to help him address his needy student population, which included a growing number of students with mental
illness who were undiagnosed and untreated. The school board denied his request because staffing in the district was uniformly assigned based on a staffing formula and student enrollment. In addition, while the students who matriculated into his high school came from Title I elementary schools, they did not continue to receive Title I supports in high school because the Argus district diverted all Title I funding to the elementary feeder schools in the district. Principal Knight explained his request for a social worker:

I’ve asked for differentiated staffing. With the argument: “We asked our teachers to differentiate in the classroom because not all of those kids are the same.” Well, not all of our schools are the same. We’re a Title I school without the title. We are the profile because all of our feeder schools are Title I kids, so we’re a Title I school, but we don’t get the Title funding because the governing board took the Title away from us. This makes sense for two reasons. One was to put the money and the attention on earlier education. Okay, that makes sense. The other thing was that at the time, it gets us off the hook for any sanctions from NCLB. Because if you’re a title school and you don’t make AYP, then you’re in deep doo-doo. Well, knock on wood, we’ve never had that problem, but okay. I would like a social worker.

Principal Knight stated that he could use one of his full-time teacher allocations to fund the social worker position from his allotted staffing, so he did have autonomy to flexibly use the staffing he was given, but he was not willing to make the trade-off of taking away a classroom teacher in exchange for larger classes across the board. Mr. Carson, a teacher at Carl Sagan High School, explained that the reason the district chose not to fund the social worker was because the functions of the social worker were not seen as directly related to student achievement:

We have had some social work help in the past. It mostly came through interim social workers through the city of Phoenix, but the city wanted us to pay them. They wanted us to hire them, actually, when they were finished. The [Argus] district is very academically focused, and so social workers would not support... that’s not the right word. It goes back to funding. So the funding goes to academics, even though a social worker would support academics. I don’t think that’s entirely understood. We might be able to fund a social worker but it would
be at the expense of a classroom teacher. So when you look at the funding formula, if you wanted to assign one of your staff to be a social worker you could do that, but it’s going to raise class size of other classes and that’s just too big to bite off.

Principal Knight also described the funding gap that occurred when students from his feeder schools who received Title I money moved up to his high school, which did not receive Title I money:

All the schools that feed our school are Title I schools except one. They all have multiple content coaches, instructional coaches, and coaches for the coaches and it’s just. . . And they have so much technology! A student came up to me that had been through our feeder schools and said, “Where’s my computer?” I said, “What do you mean” “We all got computers, and why don’t you have Smart Boards in every classroom?” All right, I can’t afford it. So the students are starting to notice. And the students are coming up to me saying, “I guess it is true. This is a kind of ghetto school.” So again, fair is not always equal, and I understand that, but . . .

Principal Knight was not alone in his wish for a social worker in the Argus district.

Principal Alameda noted similar stress to her resources that resulted from students’ increasing social needs:

I would also see a more fully developed health center with the social services, for kids as well as the medical services. So, many of our kids are just struggling with issues at home, as well as at school. We need more crisis counselors, more social services for the kids. Or, someone to help them and their parents weave through the bureaucracy of the cities because we’ve got kids that live in Phoenix, we’ve got kids that live in [neighboring city], so it’s not one size fits all.

Also in the Argus district, Aung San Suu Kyi, High School Principal Sparrow, voiced frustration over what she saw as bureaucratic rules regarding a lack of funding for interventions to help students who failed their AIMS tests:

So even though we don't have money for interventions, we still need to give interventions because that's part of our plan for our [North Central Accreditation] goals that we have interventions to help all kids. So somehow we have to encourage our staff to still give interventions for kids, but wait, we can't do them during the school day. It's not allowed anymore. Why? I don't know. We can do
them, but we can't pay teachers because that's double dipping. But wait, the state says now you can. But District says, “No.” But the state says, “You can.” So okay. “Wait, if you [work] for the state, we can pay you, but if you work for the district we can't.” Right hand, left hand.

In addition, Principal Sparrow noted the difficulty of acquiring funding for more science and technology labs. Where a prior superintendent approved funding of new labs, when he left, she lost her funding:

I’ve been trying for years to get the biology labs and the science labs. We just added the engineering program, and there’s Project Lead the Way, a medical science focus that they wanted. When the former superintendent came in he said, “Give me a proposal and we’ll do it,” and I was like, “Woo-hoo!” He goes, “Don’t worry about money. We’ll do it,” but now that he’s gone . . .

When her staffing levels were cut, Principal Alameda described her dilemma in deciding whether to cut small Advanced Placement classes or academic assistance labs designed to help struggling students:

Well, you’ve got to make a decision. Do you fund the eighteen kids for AP, you know, Literature and Composition? Or do you squeeze it and do an academic lab? Those are the kinds of questions where you’re between a rock and a hard spot. It comes down to “Who’s going to squawk the most?” You know, I’ll have to figure out a different way to support those [struggling kids]. Now, if there are kids who are really struggling, can I put them in a special education academic lab? Of course I can, but there’s going to be more limited space than what I had before. So, we’ll just have to look and try the best we can do with what we’ve got.

Furthermore, Principal Alameda voiced a desire to have a structure in place similar to the advisory period that principals in Prometheus had:

I think a lot of kids need extra support and those middle students don’t get it. There’s no mechanism in place for us to be able to shore up the skills of those students. And, more importantly, just provide them that connection that they need with a person. Someone to pay attention to that they’re not doing their homework, they’re not getting their assignments done. You know, give them that extra push because with classroom teachers having 170 kids, it’s tough to do. But, if you’ve got a group of even 30 kids that you’re monitoring their progress and more or less tutoring them, it takes on a whole different aspect because you have the time to spend with them.
There was some disconfirming evidence that principals in Title I schools had plenty of funding to implement the programs and policies they wanted in their schools. For instance, while Principal Shields had sufficient support personnel to serve students’ emotional and social needs in his Title I school, he faced the same constraint that non-title principals dealt with in staffing for academic classes. Because of low enrollments in an Advanced Placement class, Principal Shields had to cut the class from the schedule:

I mean sometimes it's like we don't have room for an AP teacher, you know, and there's only eleven kids registered. We’ve got to. Yeah, it's the numbers. I mean, I know that's what they really want—those classes—and they had AP going, I know in like, I think all of the history classes, the math, calculus, and then I think in science we had [AP] Bio and Physics. So there's several. But this year I know they had to drop the [AP] Bio 1 just because our [other] numbers were so high. It was staffing. And I think it was like one of those issues where our numbers were like almost there for [adding] a teacher but not enough, and so they were filling the [AP] classes with 35 kids.

Therefore, it appeared that while the Title I principals did have some autonomy to choose new curriculum, student intervention programs, and policies, they still faced the same limits to staffing that principals of non-Title I schools faced. Furthermore, it appeared that principals had to weigh their decisions to cut classes based upon number of students served and reaction from their community.

**Trust-Related Autonomy**

Of the three schools I studied in the Prometheus district, only one had met AYP during the study year\(^\text{10}\). In the responses of this school’s principal and teachers, I found some evidence that Principal Sharp and her staff perceived they had extra autonomy at

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\(^{10}\) There were other schools in the Prometheus School District that had made AYP, but I happened to have selected only one to be in my study.
Paul Watson High School because the school had met AYP and because the principal felt trusted by the district. Principal Sharp commented on this autonomy:

So, I have quite a bit of autonomy here at the school. Paul Watson is not in school improvement, but many of our schools in the district are, so that takes the focus off of us. It is kind of like you can get away with doing some things because no one is really watching you that closely. So, we do tend to be of the ask-for-forgiveness-rather-than-permission mindset.

Principal Sharp felt trusted by the district and her superintendent instructionally, both because the school was not in corrective action and because of her earlier choice to bring a successful curriculum to her school:

Instructionally, in my instructional program—I was the first—we decided to go down the Think More Curriculum route before the district did, so we had that curve quite a bit. And I can do that because we’re not in school improvement. [The district] think[s] we’re okay; they don’t really have to pay that much attention or put much time into us. So that helps us as a school.

Ms. Carres was also aware that Principal Sharp was highly regarded and given more freedom because of the school’s success:

I know in our school, our principal has been given a lot of freedom to do what she likes because she’s been very successful. And, a lot of people really like her, so if—I don’t know if input is necessary, but we have discussions on how to best work with our staff on how to implement things.

The fact that both the principal and her teachers were aware of their conditional autonomy suggested that they viewed it as an earned privilege they hoped to keep.

This phenomenon was echoed by the superintendent’s own leadership philosophy: to give certain principals more latitude than others, depending on their leadership competency. When asked for names of effective principals in his district, Superintendent Lumen provided several that he felt confident in. Then he further commented on how he adapted his monitoring of each based on his trust in their competence:
I do a little big brother stuff there (referring to one principal), leave him alone (referring to a different principal), leave her alone. Mentor [him]. Bounce ideas off [her]. Be nice to everybody, you know, and then leave him alone. I spend the other 80% of my time with the other principals that I didn’t mention to you. . . . You know, these [effective leaders’] schools—I’m not worried about them. And when they call and ask for something, I give it to them because they never call and ask for anything. I said, “What can I do to help the principals?” [One principal] said, “Whenever—whomever you define are the [principals you trust]—when we ask for something—because we never ask you—give it to us. Because we really need it.” The other ones you have to kind of help.

This was the only evidence from both districts of any variance in level of autonomy given to principals by their superintendent. It is possible that this type of autonomy also existed in Argus, but none of the Argus superintendents or principals articulated any special freedom resulting from trust. Principal Knight did state that “if people with the purse strings or the permission slips like you (the district office), you’re probably going to get more thrown your way.” However, neither of the Argus superintendents nor Principal Knight framed this reciprocation as autonomy earned by trust. In this case, Principal Knight referred to building positive social relationships with the district where other principals were sometimes socially unpleasant to district leadership.

**Accountability Policy’s Impact on Principals’ Ability to Pursue Social Justice**

The findings on the impact of AZ Learns and NCLB on principals’ ability to pursue social justice reveal that these accountability policies only marginally impeded principals’ social justice efforts, if at all. Instead, the evidence suggested that principals were able to use the policies and school labels as motivation for making improvements to their campus procedures and policies, including adopting more rigorous curriculum,
expanding access to honors and AP classes, and exhibiting culturally responsive leadership practices.

However, identifying principals’ social justice efforts proved to be less black and white than I expected. First, not all of the principals were aware of or engaged with the term *social justice*. Only the Prometheus principals answered that they were familiar with social justice in education prior to being provided with my definition. The Argus principals admitted they did not know the term and asked me for my definition. As noted in the Methods chapter, I provide a sample definition of *social justice* in education for principals as “expanding and equalizing opportunities for students who have been traditionally underserved or marginalized.” One of the Argus principals initially thought that the term meant the opposite of my definition and began to grow angry until I explained my definition of social justice.

Second, I found that principals in Argus and Prometheus differed in their interpretations of “expanding and equalizing opportunities for students who have been traditionally underserved or marginalized.” When I asked them to identify areas in which they worked to expand opportunities for underserved and marginalized students, all six principals attempted to give examples of their efforts to do so. However, where Argus principals tended to generalize “expanding access to opportunities” to all students across the board, Prometheus principals tended to focus on students who had historically been provided with inferior educational opportunities, such as students of color, students who recently immigrated to the United States, and students living in poverty.
Principal Definitions of Social Justice in Education

In the Argus district, principals generally defined “social justice in education” as encouraging all students to achieve academically. They described practices that would benefit all students in their school rather than practices that were designed to assist specific groups of students. For instance, Principal Alameda defined social justice in the following way:

I think providing the best education for every single kid and not pigeonholing kids because of circumstance. I think that’s what I would say. I mean, it doesn’t mean that you lessen the rules for kids, but you provide a safe place for them, you give them the same opportunities to take the same classes that anybody can take. All of those kinds of things. You encourage kids to excel and stretch.

Principal Knight framed his definition in terms of the grading change he was leading his teachers through:

In our new system, the math works, but in our teachers’ minds, [the new grading system] unfairly gives the student an advantage. Well, grades are not about an advantage. Grades are about compensation, about communication, and so a lot of teachers use grades as a form of justice. So when you say “social justice,” I think of a lot of different things with that. I don’t know. We all have our biases and our teachers and students have their biases, and I’m sure in the classroom there’s all kind of things going on that would freak me out but that’s the way it is.

Principal Sparrow defined social justice as providing opportunities, but she noted that the opportunities might not need to be the same for every student:

I think it’s more about providing opportunities for everyone. It’s not really equal opportunities, it’s just providing opportunities. You just have to provide opportunities for each student although the opportunity that each student needs might be different because your opportunity might be different than my opportunity, but as long as we both get to a place where we want to be, then it’s okay.

While Argus principals’ definitions of social justice tended to include all students rather than a specific focus on historically underserved or marginalized students, when
asked if there were particular groups or students they worried about, two of the district’s principals identified special education students. For instance, Principal Alameda identified students with special needs and mental illness as the students she was most concerned about:

I probably am more concerned about my lowest special ed. kids because their future after high school is so uncertain. . . . There’s not a lot of opportunities out there for them. So, those are the kind of kids I worry about. Some of the parents are not as able to maneuver that bureaucracy to get the services that the kids need. . . . We have the private day placement here, the private school here for emotionally disturbed kids. It’s for the—basically—it’s for the mentally ill kids who are not going to get better. So, I worry about them and what’s going to happen to them. We’ve had some really good success stories from there. But you know, they’re different. So, I kind of worry about them and how we help them transition into adulthood.

Principal Alameda shared one of the success stories regarding one of her special education students who qualified for a dual enrollment math class, a class in which students earn high school and college credit concurrently:

So, we’ll have some of our special ed. kids that you would never think would take a [dual enrollment] college class, and they do. And they do okay because it’s an area of interest to them, and the teacher is very accommodating and will work with those kids. But they still have to do the same amount of work. It might be a little bit different. So, it’s been really interesting to see those kids. And there was a kid—a fifth year—he’s going to be a fifth year senior. He went, as part of the [Youth Transition Program], he took the Accuplacer [college placement test], and son of a gun if he didn’t qualify for college math! I never would’ve thought that.

Principal Knight also identified students with special needs as a group of students he was concerned about:

If I thought of it like a student with special needs, but they have accommodations because the law says so. Some of them have more than others, and all we’re trying to do is to level the playing field. We’re not making it easier for them. We’re making it more accessible. We’re not guaranteeing them that they will be successful, but we’re just saying that given the disabilities that you have or whatever it is, we’re going to help you access the material. I’m not going to
change it other than the pathway. Maybe the product, maybe the choice, or maybe something in that area. . . .

As he elaborated, Principal Knight began to discuss social justice as differentiation—making adjustments to address individual students’ needs:

I think what’s good for students with special needs is good for any student. I think that is our biggest issue on our campus, and I think I can generalize this, but I’ll only speak for my campus. Differentiation is just talked about but really not used with quality, fidelity, and consistency. You know, differentiation is, you know, choice, process, or product. We are not really differentiating like we should. That's a way. I mean it’s a way. I think I am starting to get this “social justice” piece. Because it’s sort of like, and I’m not sure if I should go here or not, but to me, it’s sort of like our political parties and kind of a belief system. You know the conservative/liberal type of thing where, I mean, I don’t want to get into a political discourse here, but I mean, I will tell you I am a liberal democrat, and whatever that means. And I know that I’m rare. My other colleagues in the schools don’t swing that way.

Principal Knight also discussed his awareness of poverty in the community his school served and its implications for his staff:

We have no or very little social capital. I mean if you want to teach and do it at Sagan, it’s harder. I will tell you, and I will be very, very honest. Not that any teaching is easy. No. No. It is not. I will tell you here at Sagan High School you can’t be ordinary. I know a lot of teachers that have left Sagan to teach at better schools. And what happens is that they can get away with being ordinary and be successful. At Sagan you cannot be ordinary and be successful. You have to be extraordinary. So yeah, the obstacle is poverty, which breeds all the ills that we have. The other thing is you have to be extraordinary because the usual stuff just won’t work.

Principal Sparrow identified the students she was concerned about as those who struggled academically or emotionally:

But I have my adoptees as I call them, and those are kids that struggle in a couple of different ways. Some of them struggle with home life, some of them with grades, some of them with life in general. And I call them in like every three weeks. I'll pull up their [grades and attendance], and I'll call them in and say, “Here's your grades. What happened to this assignment? This assignment? This assignment?” Other ones I'll go up and just sit in their classroom and wave at them and let them know that I'm watching them.
Where principals in the Argus district did not appear to identify minority students as needing increased social justice in their schools, they did identify special education students as students they were concerned about. Two of the Argus principals provided evidence that they were concerned for these historically underserved students’ well being and future. Furthermore, Principal Knight discussed the influence of poverty in some of his students’ lives suggesting his awareness of the challenges that these historically underserved students have faced.

In the Prometheus School District, principals appeared confident in equating social justice with expanding access to historically underserved students. Principal Sharp cited equitable educational access as important but also the school’s obligation to provide educational opportunities for underserved students that they might not have had outside of school:

I would say that it’s equitable access. That’s how I would define [social justice in education]. That plays out, or looks like, at Paul Watson, for example, that our college going-curriculum is in every classroom. It’s not just in our honors classrooms, and it’s not just in our AP classrooms. Our college-going curriculum and our core classes is for every student, so they’re all on the same curriculum and [students are] all on the same pathway. . . . When I talk to educators in other districts, and we talk about the kids who are struggling, whether it’s academically or emotionally or physically or whatever it might be, they don’t have the same opportunities that other kids do—to get private tutors or to take those summer camps, and to go off on those European trips, to gain that cultural capital and those sorts of things. So we have an obligation to try to compensate for that in whatever way we can. I think that most educators who teach in a school like ours, in a district like ours, have that understanding in their heart that their job is a little bit more complicated and multi-faceted with respect to compensating for those things that aren’t there, that other schools have.

At Paul Farmer High School, Principal Shields defined “social justice in education” as “the gift of access, opportunity and support to all kids, regardless of
academic classification.” But beyond this initial definition, he distinguished between giving the gift of access and opportunity to the top kids in the school versus giving the opportunity to all students. Furthermore, he identified another leadership responsibility of a Title I principal—to fight stratification of opportunities for students in Title I schools:

You have stratification even in a Title I school. What’s going to be the first thing that the institution tries to do? Step and track, “So I’m in a Title I school, but I’m going to save my gifted kids first, and then I’m going to create some stuff for the general ed., and then I’m going to do a bunch of wrap-around programs for the kids not making it so that I can feel good about myself.” But you’re not really giving the gift of access and opportunity to all kids hands-down. Just because we’re a Title I school doesn’t mean that we don’t have to fight constantly against that type of stratification. Even inside of a Title I school, the honors and the gifted, the adults in the school are going to be naturally drawn to them: “You poor kid. You’re in this area. You have all the cards. You’re so intelligent, and you’re a joy to work with, and you make my job easier. I’m going to go to the mat for you, but not necessarily for the regular general population.” So the gift of access and opportunity and support for everybody means institutional structures that provide those things for all kids—barrier removal.

Principal Hart defined social justice beyond justice in education. When asked for his definition of “social justice in education,” he discussed basic human rights, the need for expanding understanding to reduce hate, political issues of power, and education’s role in expanding understanding:

We are talking about those world human rights, you know, that people should have the right to an education, the right to express themselves as they see fit. Basic human rights are a good place to start for all people. I don’t care if you’re polka dotted from Mars; if you’re a caring, loving person that wants to give love and help others, then we need to have bundles of polka dotted people from mars like that here. I think there is so much hate. I think we need to work to fight hate and work to have a deeper better understanding of people and of our planet. When I think of social justice, I think of all the people that are trying to grab power in different ways instead of trying to bring about better communication. You know social justice is just a really big issue. . . . There is no such thing as an “illegal” child. There are just illegal laws that frame children as “illegal.” So I think for social justice we have to do a lot of educating and expanding visions for people. There’s much narrow mindedness, and every generation we have to do bigger and better work because it’s just so easy for
people by nature to hate and to become isolated and start thinking negatively. We have to ingrain some of those pieces in our education for our people, or we’re going to suffer greatly as a society. We are failing as an education system: not helping to educate people better on how to love and how to be kind.

From these definitions, one can see that the range of definitions of “social justice in education” is broad, which echoes the interpretive dilemma of defining “social justice” in society at large (Bogotch, Shoorman, & Miron, 2008). And while the Argus principals’ definitions may have been tentative, two of them demonstrated an awareness of special education students as a group who deserved some educational social justice.

Regarding accountability policy’s effects upon principals’ ability to help the students they were concerned about, my findings indicate that AZ Learns and NCLB did at the same time prevent and promote principals’ social justice efforts, epitomizing the paradox these policies continue to present to educators. First, I describe the limited evidence that the policies have inhibited social justice. The only evidence of accountability policy impeding a principal’s ability to pursue social justice came from principal Hart.

**Accountability Policy Inhibiting Social Justice**

Principal Hart was visibly upset as he recounted a the story of a Congo refugee student who was unable to pass the AIMS writing test despite augmentation, and, therefore, was not able to earn his high school diploma. This failure was culturally devastating to the boy and his family. In his culture, his failure to earn a high school diploma was so severe that the boy wanted to commit suicide rather than face his family. Principal Hart described the extent to which the boy tried to attain his diploma:

So here’s a kid that witnessed a large portion of his family macheted to death in the Congo, and this kid is a refugee, never had any formal education, has had to learn a new alphabet, has had to learn a completely new culture, has had to learn
to dress himself in different types of clothing, had to learn how to use a kitchen in an apartment and everything as a refugee would have to. And he has worked so incredibly hard to have solid A's and B's, rock solid A's and B's. And he passes the reading and math AIMS, but he doesn't pass the writing [test] because, you know, it takes a while to learn to write at a tenth grade level, especially if you're learning a new culture and you're facing abject poverty, and you've dealt with all the trauma of your family members being murdered and you're learning a new alphabet and you've been displaced from your home and hauled off and moved somewhere called Phoenix, Arizona. And then you're one point away from gaining augmentation to where you can graduate.

So we have to go to this kid and show him the augmentation table and say, “I'm sorry. You're one point away from graduating.” This student went into such severe depression. He still didn't understand it. He went to the superintendent's office and pleaded his case. “I'm sorry, we can't change it. It's not our rule.” He went all the way down to the Department of Education and pleaded his case. And they couldn't change it. He's one point away from graduating. This is a kid that has been through all of this. So he can't face his family and he tells everybody that he's going to kill himself. Seriously, he’s going to kill himself.

Principal Hart somberly recounted this story. Then he added,

> That's one of the faces of how wrong NCLB is, how wrong No Child Left Behind is because it did just the opposite. It did leave the child behind. It just left 200 children behind, just in the Prometheus School District. So it did the exact opposite. It says not to leave any child behind, and it absolutely did.

According to the Prometheus principals and teachers, close to 200 students failed to pass their AIMS tests and consequently were not awarded diplomas. Principal Hart noted the discriminatory nature of the policy: “You know, there's a lot of ways—there's a lot of discriminatory practices that are unwritten. And any time—there's nothing so unfair as to treat everyone the same.”

**Accountability Policy Alongside of Social Justice**

While one principal described his inability to help a disadvantaged student to earn a high school diploma because of NCLB, there was more evidence that the six principals in the study could and did pursue social justice on their campuses, albeit in varying
forms. For instance, Principal Hart took time to acquaint his teaching staff to the abject poverty that their students lived in and to make a point about testing bureaucracy:

When I hire a staff member, the first day that they start here, I load them up in a van and I drive them to homes that I visited the prior year when I'm out trying to help reach kids. And last year I drove up to a home with a van full of teachers and I said, “You guys, you see this house?” and it was down by the river bottom, very poor, you know, shack of a house. I said to the van full of teachers, “Let me tell you a story: I went up and knocked on that door looking for their daughter because she wasn't at school for AIMS testing. When mom answered the door she didn't say a word to me, and she walked around the truck that had flat tires in the carport and I follow behind her and alongside the house,” and I pulled the van up, and I said, “You see down the long side of the house, there's that old woodshed back there? Do you see the door?” I walked up to it and it opened, and inside the shed I could see in. Hanging on the wall was a mirror and electrical cord that was draped from the house with a light, and on the floor was a mattress. And lo and behold, this girl walks out of that shed, the girl, my student, to take the AIMS test. And looking at her, her hair looked pretty and her clothes looked nice. And she got in this very van that I'm driving you teachers in, and I drove her back to school to take that test. But when I drove back to the school, I was told, “Well, it's too late for her to test.” And I said, “No, it's not. It's not too late.” Anybody in this van think it's too late for her to test? Because if you do, you're in the wrong profession. If you do, you're in the wrong profession.” I need people with a heart, you know. That's the truth.

Principal Hart’s field trip helped him communicate his expectations for his teachers to care about and understand their students’ challenges. Furthermore, it was evident that Principal Hart knew his community, had ventured out in it, and had reached out to students and their families. Principal Hart also articulated his awareness of the “unwritten curriculum” that shaped teachers’ perceptions of their students:

It would be really nice to genuinely achieve equity for all kids, so all kids have the opportunity to make their dreams come true. We like to say we do, but we really don't. There is not a whole lot of equity. I think we’re really striving for it, but there is not as much equity as we’d like to think. . . . The unwritten curriculum of the staff, how they feel about a certain kid or what have you, the different discriminations that go on. We really need to work more to develop better staff to understand how to better reach kids all the different kids, every single kid.
In addition to educating their staffs about their students’ needs and life situations, Principal Hart and the other Prometheus district principals cited the Advisory period that they had instituted each day or once a week as a vehicle that they hoped would reach students and assist them socially and emotionally in addition to supporting their academic achievement. Principal Sharp, also in the Prometheus district voiced her optimism about the advisory period as a vehicle to increasing social justice on her campus:

One of the things I’m really excited about next year is that we’re adding an advisory program, and the whole point of that is that we want all of our students to have a real connection with an adult and with their peers that makes them well-known, so they’re not invisible and so they feel connected to the school. They feel connected to people within the school, and that builds into social justice. It’s through those connections that people start building empathy, and it’s the lack of empathy, in my mind, which leads to injustice, which leads to acts of intolerance and injustice; this inability to identify with another person. So those kinds of connections, I think, will build to that area. So that’s a piece of the social justice issue: you provide an academic program that has equitable access and then you provide the sort of school climate and community support services that build empathy, tolerance, and an openness to varied perspectives in people.

In addition, Principal Sharp cited her focus on college as an option for all of her students as another effort at improving the social justice on her campus:

And it was a cultural shift for us because we have teachers who in their heart of hearts think they are doing the right thing by believing that they don’t want to set the kids up for failure [by encouraging college], and that a kid can have a very full life without going to college. So why should we [encourage college]? So we had those conversations, and we presented lots of reasons and data, and anecdotal, cognitive, as well as emotional social information to make that shift.

Principal Shields of the Prometheus district also identified overcoming low expectations for his students as a social justice goal at his school. In particular, he worked to increase access to Advanced Placement and honors classes. He also described how he had to help his teaching staff change the way they thought about who should take AP and honors classes:
Challenges, all right. Expanding the access to rigor for the entire population: there is still a lot of exclusivity with honors and AP, and not wanting to let other kids into the show. “Mr. Shields, these kids aren’t ready. These kids aren’t ready. We need to do physical science. We have to do physical science coming out of the middle school.” No, we don’t. Do you know what the East Valley schools and the high performing schools do? Biology, coming out of 8th grade. There is no reason in the world these kids cannot do biology. Deficit model thinking. Expanding the access. These kids need bio because that puts them at Chemistry sophomore year, and it opens up higher level college course taking.

So what does that look like when the rubber hits the road? Honors by request. The structure that was in place before was that you had to be recommended by a teacher to go into honors, and then you had to have a B or an A in order to go into honors. So I removed that, and now any kid can fill out a form and request honors classes with the understanding that if they do not pull at least a C, they will be returned to a general ed. classroom. That was major. So that’s an example of barrier removal. Any kid on campus can step up now, “I’m going to do honors.”

By allowing students to self-select honors and AP classes, Principal Shields removed adult gatekeepers who in the past had been “picking and choosing the winners versus the losers.” As a result, the school was able to multiply its sections of honors and expand access to these classes.

In the Argus district, there was some evidence that Carl Sagan High School had widened access to honors and advanced classes as a school-wide focus. One of the school’s teachers, Ms. Bowers, noted the school’s efforts to remove barriers to their honors program:

We used to have a closed program, application only and that. We did away with the application. We did away with recommendations. It's the student and the parents that decide whether they're motivated enough to be part of the program. And in the [feeder school] program, all students will participate. All. Special ed. students, EL students. All students. All courses. All teachers. Everyone will be part of the program.

Also in the Argus district one Betty Makoni High School teacher described how her teaching department was making efforts to increase access to honors classes.
However, the effort was not school-wide. Instead, it grew from a smaller group of teachers who wanted to change the existing policy for honors and AP enrollment. Ms. Maddow, one of the teachers stated:

Our school addresses [social justice], but I don't know that it's necessarily school-wide. I think it's being addressed more on a small group level or individual level. For example, when I meet with the Honors and AP teachers, since I'm a level leader, I've shared with them that one of my goals is to increase the number of minority students in our Honors and AP classes and also to keep the students who are currently there, there. So I gave them an example of like two girls in my second hour: one is African-American and one is Native American, and both were borderline C-D [grades]. If students have D's, the counselors remove them from our classes. Like we just don't see them when the new semester starts. So I could have potentially lost those two students except that I emailed the counselors and said, “Do not remove these two students from my class. If they slip and get a 69 or whatever, I want them to stay in the class.” So I share that with the other Honors and AP teachers and tell them, “You know, you need to email the counselors and tell them not to drop the students.”

Likewise, the counselors will come around kind of at the end of the school year and show us a list of students who signed up for the next level. So I got to look at a list of all my current sophomores who signed up for Advanced Placement next year, and I'm asked to look at the list and highlight any names of students I don't think should be taking the class. So I kind of did that, but I realized I don't like doing that because I like students to be able to have a chance and an opportunity without my closing the door before they even get to step foot in it. But I have highlighted three students’ names just because their grades have been consistently kind of poor . . . But of the three names I highlighted, two are minority students. So I told the counselor right then and there, ‘Look, I just happen to notice two out of these three are minority students, and so would you please talk to them first? I don't want the door shut to them just because I highlighted their names. But they might need some counseling. But that's me removing two students.

When asked if her decision to keep the students in her class was prompted by a school initiative, the teacher stated that it was not. It was the result of her self-reflection and professional reading. However, her principal, Principal Alameda, had also mentioned intentionally placing students in honors classes and expanding AP classes:

We have encouraged and sometimes hand-picked kids to go into honors. We’ve expanded our AP. We’ve expanded our dual enrollment. We’ve got about 50% of
all of our juniors tested with the Accuplacer in math, reading, and writing this year. We’re striving for 100%, but it didn’t happen. But at least we’re trying to have every single student, including special ed., understand that they are capable of education beyond high school.

At another school in the Argus district Principal Knight of Carl Sagan High School eliminated the “sweep” policy on his campus. Under the sweep policy, students who came to school late were sent to a separate room to sit during the period instead of going to class late. Principal Knight commented on why he eliminated sweep:

We have developed what we call a Student Relationship Committee, which analyzes all of our processes and procedures because some typical process and procedures just won't work at a school with social justice issues. . . .

For instance, just a simple one, like sweep will not work at our school. You could do it, but it's going to really significantly limit and reduce the efficacy of everything else that you do because—not that I disagree that it's important to be where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there—but the rigidity of it just does not work with students of poverty because you're asking them to adhere to a system that is absolutely so far removed from their reality. I mean, there's no way. I mean, you might as well scoop them up and send them to Russia and say okay, go for it. It's just not going to work.

In addition to changing school policies to include more equitable academic opportunities, two principals in Prometheus expressed an awareness of political injustice regarding how their students were affected by state politics. For instance, Principal Hart described what happened to one of his students:

I had a kid where his younger brothers and sisters were born here; he wasn’t. He was brought here when he was six years old and grew up here, and then the police caught him and deported him. Dropped him—took him—this is in Phoenix, Arizona, in the year of 2011—drove him in a bus with a bunch of other people that were illegal, and drove him down to Nogales and dumped him on the other side of the border. And he knew no one down there.

Principal Sharp also recounted a form of political injustice that one of her students experienced:
The student that comes to my mind right now is a student who enrolled two weeks before graduation as a senior honors student who is now leaving. He’s dropping out. His father got deported, and the family is moving to Mexico to move to an area he’s never been to in his life. He’s never seen it. He’s never been there. So he’s moving there, and he won’t stay even though we really tried to persuade him. He feels that his family needs him. His family needs him. When his father goes out and gets work, he can’t leave his mom and his younger siblings unattended because he, like many of us, are watching the news of what’s happening in Mexico. He’s going there frightened for the safety and the security of his family. So he is leaving three weeks before he graduates from high school so that he can play the role of a caretaker for his family—because his father got deported.

Principal Sharp also allowed her students to express their political activism and guided them in how to go about it without sacrificing their education. For instance, when students were walking out of schools to attend anti-immigration protests downtown,

Principal Sharp engaged her students in a conversation and action plan. Mr. Albers, a teacher at Paul Watson, described Principal Sharp’s role in helping students with their protest plans:

And [the student was] just like, “Well, why don’t we do something here?” So [the student] proposed a sit-in once we talked about different alternatives. It was just one of the teachable moments. So [the student] and her friend went and talked to the principal, and the following Monday, they had a sit-in that was attended during advisory. Some of the kids, the principal, and our instructional specialist helped them write little speeches, and they allowed whole advisories or you could just send a couple of kids. And our principal was out there. So were a couple of administrators, security, and they all “sat in.” And [the students] felt like really productive—and so [Principal Sharp] was receptive to that.

Mr. Benchot also noted his principal’s involvement in helping the school’s students make political decisions that were productive:

[Principal Sharp] really worked with our student population when they wanted to do their walk-outs and stuff and taught them that, “Look, your power is in education. So I get that you want to walk-out, but if you’re saying that you want to remain a citizen of the United States, but yet you’re walking away from your education, what are you saying?” It’s like, “Stay in school; after school you can then participate in this. But show them that you want to part a part of school.
That's one of your rights.” And so that would be an example of her, you know, trying to educate [students] on what would be the right way of doing things.

Principals pursued social justice in their schools insofar as they looked to the welfare of groups of students whose suffering they were aware of. As demonstrated above, principals did not appear to be constrained by NCLB or AZ Learns in their efforts at creating socially just practices, with the exception of rigid graduation requirements that depended on students passing AIMS. It was more often larger social and political forces in the state that impacted their students’ ability to learn: poverty, trauma, or deportation.
In this chapter I share my findings regarding principals’ leadership styles as they dealt with increased job responsibilities, used their autonomy, and/or worked for social justice. In order to focus more squarely upon the leadership styles that principals exhibited due to accountability policy, I primarily share the findings of principals’ leadership behaviors that were related to AZ Learns and NCLB, or to the changes in their schools designed to increase test scores. The principals and teachers provided many examples of notable principal leadership behaviors. However, in the search for what constitutes Vortex Leadership, I first share the findings regarding the four leadership styles identified in the Review of the Literature—Managerial Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Social Justice Leadership. Then I focus in on two leadership practices that distinguish Vortex Leadership from the other four leadership types.

There were two leadership practices that emerged as Vortex Leadership as principals applied Managerial, Instructional, Transformational, and Social Justice Leadership. First, the findings allowed me to expand my definition of Social Justice Leadership to include principals’ cultural responsiveness to their students’ and/or their families’ cultural needs. Akin to Gay’s (2010) culturally responsive teaching which strives to serve minority students’ interests and abilities, culturally responsive leadership draws from students’ strengths, too, instead of attempting to reform students culturally. Culturally responsive teaching is “teaching to and through [students’] personal and cultural strengths” (Gay, 2010, p. 26) versus teaching students to fill in their cultural
deficiencies and gaps. Likewise, some of the principals I studied exhibited culturally responsive leadership practices to capitalize upon their students’ strengths and to promote cultural responsiveness within their teaching staffs. Therefore, culturally responsive leadership emerged as a key Vortex Leadership practice.

Second, the findings revealed that principals who exhibited Vortex Leadership embodied a form of social knowhow that they applied strategically within their school accountability-related improvement efforts. I call this leadership style *socially savvy* leadership. Socially savvy leadership includes the strategic maneuverings and situational awareness exhibited by the principals as they worked to effect the changes they desired in their schools. It is a key characteristic of Vortex Leadership. The principals who exhibited it were successful in balancing external accountability demands with their school’s internal needs for change.

**Managerial Leadership**

I was surprised to find that superintendents and principals unapologetically embraced managerial leadership as a crucial behavior for successful leadership; however, they noted the necessity to “manage people” and “manage change” rather than the necessity of managing money or tangible assets. For instance, Prometheus Superintendent Lumen stated that he valued school principals who could manage their people and the climate of their campus:

> So, a good principal is very self-aware, but also very socially aware. Understand, from my perspective their job is both science and art and managing the psychological climate of [their] campus. Because if you’re a principal in Prometheus, you can’t educate 2,000 kids. You know, you need 150 people to do that. Your job is to keep the 150 heading in the same direction.
In example, Superintendent Lumen described an effective principal whom he felt
managed teachers’ union relations well:

[This principal] understands the science of Prometheus politics, too. His teachers
are always happy. I meet with all of the Union association leaders, you know,
once a month in a little group. And it’s, you know, it’s kind of a complain-a-thon.
I do it because 85% is just kind of venting. But the 15% that I hear about that’s
valuable is really valuable. The last two or three years I’ve had two or three
different association leaders, and everything is great. They don’t have anything to
report. [This principal] really manages the climate really, really well.

Superintendent August in the Argus district also commented on the need for
principals to manage their school staffs to achieve their hoped for results:

They also have to know a lot about systems and how to use and leverage all the
various resources and talents that are in that building to get the results. They have
to know how to hire, support and retain quality teachers.

Meanwhile, at the school level, Principal Knight acknowledged the need for
managing change among staff, particularly when initiating something new that might be
met with resistance:

That’s what leadership is mainly: managing change. So there are strategies in how
to manage change, and you have to know all of the change processes, theories of
change, and all of these people who have written extensively on change. And so
you have the early innovators, which are great: “You get it. Yeah!” And then you
have the masses, and then you have the laggards, who are, you know. Then you
have—every campus does—every organization has 5% of what I call submarine
commanders and their mission in life is to torpedo anything. So you’ve got 5%
that are out there that are committed to destroying, causing chaos, and everything
else. So you’re managing all of that.

In the context of accountability, as I note in Chapter 4, principals were able to use
accountability policy to initiate changes on their campus. Because NCLB and AZ Learns
required schools to increase the number of students meeting proficiency in testing,
principals were in the position of asking their staff to change their teaching or adapt to
school structure changes. Managing staff affective states and transitions through change
appeared to be a key leadership behavior required for successfully leading in a time of increased external accountability. Also noted in Chapter 4, managing staff perception of school labels was important for principals to maintain staff and community morale, especially if schools did not meet AYP.

**Instructional Leadership**

Instructional Leadership *per se* was not emphasized by the participants to the degree or specificity I had anticipated. I had expected that instructional leadership via classroom observations, modeling of teaching methods, or advocacy of specific teaching strategies would have been more pronounced in participants’ responses. Instead, the majority of instructional leadership appeared to be related to data analysis. There was a good deal of evidence that the principal led advisory teams or site councils through data analysis to identify gaps in achievement and to improve student test scores versus the principal modeling instruction or discussing curriculum.

Sharing data with teacher leadership teams appeared to be a common practice among groups in both districts. One teacher, Ms Ashton, at Carl Sagan High School described the process and challenges inherent in examining data and planning a course of action together:

> We’re trying to separate the data from the kids coming in-like, are those kids growing or are they flat lining? The initial data, this isn’t complete, so I don’t think it’s not valid, but from what we looked at is that those kids that are coming in to us from our feeder schools that are staying here are showing growth and development and are growing. But, we have kids enrolling in April or May, or, you know, March—they’re going in our statistics. So, part of this new professional development is how to identify these kids. How do we identify the gaps in their learning and what can we do? So, that’s kind of a new challenge for us.
Also in the Argus district, teachers from Betty Makoni High School examined data to identify areas for improvement. Mr. Alkine described his involvement with data and goal setting:

There are some groups of students like special education and English as a second language, and all those sub groups that [Principal Alameda] wants to see more highly perform on the AIMS test and other forms of data collection that we have. Something that she's seen over the last couple of years in her own school's performance is that [scores] have gone up. So that was nice to see. I get to see the numbers being a part of [Site Council]. We discuss those sort of things, so it is nice to see that some of those goals are being—I don't know if it's reached yet—but we're heading that direction.

Likewise, in the Prometheus district, teachers assisted principals in examining school data and determining plans for improvement. Mrs. Bersky, from Paul Farmer High School shared her professional development experience examining data on her learning team:

That was our main push in all [learning teams] is to be able to record student growth, so you know, I guess in a way that one was handed to us, like, “You guys decide as a team how you're going to prove that these students are growing.” So I guess that—so like our [group], you know, we've—through testing—we pre-test and post-test for every subject, and then you have to track your data and things like that. And then with that the support of like—what's it called—it's an assessment tool that we have that prints our scantrons and scores them and tracks the data for us.

Ms. Corbin commented on her principal’s focus on data within the school’s decision-making team of department leaders, counselors, and school staff:

[Principal Hart] has a tendency to focus a lot on data—testing data, assessment data, and we’re constantly—at least in the instructional cabinet—we’re frequently getting AIMS data and looking at that and percentages and things like that.

Aside from data study as one of the principal’s instructional foci, principals and superintendents spoke generally about other instructional leadership responsibilities. One
superintendent and four principals mentioned the need for improvement in teaching and acquiring good teachers. For instance, Superintendent August cited acquiring good teachers as “the most important thing a principal does.” Superintendent Klein shared her belief that one of the principal’s responsibilities was to model good teaching:

If you don’t know instruction and you don’t know learning, you can’t be effective to lead people. I think you need—a good principal is able to set a clear vision, a shared vision for a school. Is able to motivate people. Is able to recognize and affirm good teaching. Model teaching. You know, in a good faculty meeting, you’re modeling teaching.

In Prometheus, principals of schools in corrective action were required to focus on new curricula and thus teaching of the new curriculum, but in general, they did not express challenges in doing so. The exception was Principal Hart who addressed the need for better planning and instruction from teachers. He identified his non-negotiable expectation that teachers would make the improvements to their planning that he was asking for:

We have to improve our planning here. We have to improve our planning. We have to improve our assessment and our strategy for engaging students. We have to. It's not negotiable. ‘I will show you. I will share with you. I will coach you. I will bring in resources for you, but if you're not willing to change, then this isn't the right school for you because I have to have that. And I'll be as nice as I can, but if you're digging your heels in doing the same old thing that you've always done and it's not getting results, it's not going to work for you anymore. So if that's the case you'll just have to hate me.

Another Prometheus principal, Principal Sharp, hoped to improve teaching by asking her teachers to take one of the tests students were given:

I’m also going to give all of our teachers the ACT test to take so that they can sit down and take it and have a better idea, and hopefully as they’re taking it, they’ll think to themselves, “All right, so what can I do in my content that’s going to work towards those standards, those indicators, or skills that are in there? I could contribute in this way or that way.” At any rate, it’s those kinds of things, seeing some payoff but then, “Okay, there’s still a challenge, but here’s an idea for the
challenge.” And we throw it out there and see what happens, and we go from there.

In the Argus district, Principal Alameda identified instruction and sound assessment as something she would like to change in her school:

It would be nice if all of our teachers had a better grasp of when to use certain instructional strategies to get the best out of the kids. That would be one thing. I think the other one would be being able to develop assessments that really tell us something. Those are probably the two biggest [areas I would like to change].

Also in the Argus district, Principal Knight identified that what was most important to him was not teaching content although teachers’ teaching of content was part of a triumvirate which included the relationship between the teacher, the student, and teaching the content:

I want, I guess what the phrases is, “boots on the ground.” I want to help our students and our teachers because nothing else matters to me except our students, our teachers, and the content. Those three things, and nothing else matters. You can have all the little differentiated programs and things that are going, but it all boils down to the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the content. And so, whatever I can do to help that relationship: that’s where my focus is.

Generally, the principals in both districts did not spend significant time discussing specific instructional issues or how their leadership influenced teachers’ instruction. The exception to this was their discussion of increasing student achievement overall, which they attributed to helping teachers through changes that would enable them to better meet the needs of all of their students.

**Transformational Leadership**

Where transformational leadership in schools has been characterized as principals inviting teachers to innovate, lead, and share power with them (Marks & Printy, 2003) there was little evidence in the two districts that principals moved beyond asking teachers
for input. Most of the superintendents and principals voiced the need for principals to garner input from and share decision making with their staff and school community. However, beyond giving their input, teachers and community did not appear to play a larger part in the school leadership, innovation, or in sharing power.

Still, shared leadership was sought out and articulated as a desired goal by superintendents and principals. In the Argus district, Superintendent Klein noted the importance of principals getting input from their staff regarding the direction for their school:

I think a good principal can align the activities in the school so they’re focused on the same mission and vision. And, share results. Know when to get results and adjust the plan. I mean, you’ve got to constantly be adjusting the course of the boat as you’re going through. And, I think really, it’s the leadership piece that allows you to help the school create a vision and then adhere to that vision and keep checking back. “Is what we’re doing what we say we’re doing?” And constantly get input. You have to get a lot of input to lead a school.

Superintendent August commented on the necessity of including one’s staff in change and moving toward school goals:

Being an administrator is a really hard job. And there are you know, sometimes two steps forward, one step back; change is incremental. Even-under almost all circumstances, unless it’s a disaster change, it’s incremental. So, you have to be a person who has a long-term vision. You have to get that vision shared with the people that work with you. I think that it’s key to say “work with you” and not “for you.” And, being the kind of person that inspires others to be their best.

All of the principals or their teachers described making decisions via groups or teams, whether their team was called an advisory council, a site council, or an instructional cabinet. This decision making team was usually made up of teachers, support staff, and sometimes students or parents. At Carl Sagan High School in the Argus district, Principal Knight called upon teacher leaders to help enact new procedures on his
campus. Mrs. Ashton, a teacher on the leadership team, noted that there were more
teachers than ever on the leadership team that year:

The teacher leadership team that’s put together is about twenty-five teachers. That’s more than I’ve ever known. Usually it’s like four or five teachers. There’s like six or seven ‘leaders’ and then each leader has about five people below them. So, it might even be larger, like 30-35 people. So, I think [Principal Knight] is trying—and they’re all different departments. Different, new, middle, veteran teachers. So, I think he’s identified—he’s trying to use a broad range, so you don’t have little pockets that can be resistant to change.

Carl Sagan’s Principal Knight also led students and classified employees through an inquiry-based approach to improving relationships on his campus. This focus on relationships was consistent with Principal Knight’s articulated value of facilitating positive relationships between teachers and students:

We make sure that our student relationship committee, which is made up of certified, classified students, admin, and we look at our processes. And it isn’t about changing rules or relaxing policy or anything else. It's, you know, the first thing that we ask is, “What question are we trying to answer?” That's the first thing that we ask: “What question?” And then we ask, “What data will we need to give us the information that we are asking the right question?”

Also in the Argus district, Principal Sparrow of Suu Kyi High School created a student advisory group that met with her to give her input on issues they felt were important and to help make decisions for the school. Mrs. Albury, a teacher on campus, described the purpose and make-up of the group:

[Principal Sparrow] has her student advisory group. She pulls students from all areas. It’s like this principal’s committee or something. It’s basically students from sports, the arts, everything, all academic levels, and every so often they meet and discuss through all these different questions she has. . . By picking this committee of students that covers all the different areas on campus, not just academic, clubs, but all these little subgroups. . . .Half of them probably wouldn’t interact, or even acknowledge the other people exist. So she pulls them all together, realizing that’s the campus community. And poses questions to them, and has them give her feedback: “Okay, what about this?” “Well, this isn’t working.” “Well, what about this?” Or “How could we make this thing better?”
So she’s really knowing that we have a very diverse community, and it’s getting more and more diverse as the economy changes and people flux in and out.

At Betty Makoni High School in the Argus district, teacher leaders gave input through their school Site Council. Mr. Alkine, a teacher on the school’s site council described the make-up and purpose of the council:

I think [site council] is a major avenue for [giving input]. And we have a lot of different people involved in it. We have the language arts department. We have math department people. We have counseling involved with the career counselors actually on the team. We have support staff. We get classified on it and administration. So all the different pieces of what make Makoni at least have the opportunity to be represented, if not overly represented with [site council], and that gives us the opportunity to take a look at what the mission statement is for the school, what the goals for the year need to be specifically when you're talking about the AIMS test and different growths that you want to see and what you're going to focus on in teaching.

Sharing decision-making with teachers appeared to be especially important in the schools that were experiencing restructuring due to NCLB. For instance, at Chaves Cano High school Ms. Corbin described the committee she participated on in order to help make school restructuring decisions:

There was a committee. All—everybody was invited to join that committee. We looked at other types of programs that could work with to help with our restructuring. So, we looked at the many different ones. We did research and went online. There were whole committees of people that did that. Then we took those back to our [study groups], that was individuals who didn’t show up or come to those committees, and asked for input on that.

At Paul Farmer High School in Prometheus, teachers were able to give input into the advisory period’s implementation. Mrs. Bersky explained:

It was a vote. There were—well, first we voted last year to implement it and to study it this year, then implement it for next year, and then when we were getting ready to implement there was also another vote, like what we want it to look like and we had some choices. And people were invited to any of the meetings as those decisions were made, like “Here’s what [advisory] is going to look like.” And then they formed a committee from that and that's how [advisory] got started.
Principal Sharp articulated the challenge of “letting go” to share her leadership responsibilities with others:

I think [another] challenge is learning how to delegate, and delegate effectively. By that, really finding the right task, giving it to the right person, and then letting it go. So, building that sense of trust in you, myself, to make those kinds of judgments, and trust in the people to whom I delegate is something I am still learning about.

It is possible that Principal Sharp was not the only principal to struggle with letting go of tasks and trusting others to do the job she was ultimately responsible for. Despite the fact that principals worked side-by-side with teachers and students in several contexts, it appeared that transformational leadership in both districts was limited to allowing teachers, students, and parents to give input into decisions as opposed to allowing these groups to innovate, lead, or share power as some Transformational Leadership theorists advocate.

Social Justice and Culturally Responsive Leadership

As discussed in Chapter 4, the six principals in both districts practiced leadership targeted at assisting students who struggled academically, socially, or economically. These practices did not necessarily derive from a desire to practice Social Justice Leadership as an end, but were, as I suggested, nascent forms of social justice consciousness within some principals and more conscious acts of social justice in others. To avoid redundancy here, I will share my findings that illustrate the additional layer of cultural responsiveness that was apparent in some of the principals’ leadership.

An example of this culturally responsive leadership was demonstrated by Paul Watson High School’s Principal Sharp, who, to encourage parents to attend parent
advisory meetings, provided childcare while parents attended the meetings. Principal Sharp explained, “[The parents are] working two or three or four jobs and they have kids at home. So when we have parent events, they come and they bring all the kids, and we provide daycare.” Furthermore, Principal Sharp displayed understanding of the cultural strengths of her community instead of faulting them for not being involved in their children’s schooling:

I tried to get an advisory group for parents…what happened is my first year I thought we would meet quarterly, and we would have a group of parents who would be part of our decision team. The first advisory group of parents came in, and I brought in community members and students and staff. Then I sort of did a presentation of what Paul Watson is doing and some of the things we are challenged by and what our initiatives are. And our parents—and part of this is cultural—they have such trust in the school and that we are doing the right thing. They were all very impressed, and that is great. But they are not coming back because they think, “You are doing what needs to be done, and you don’t need me and I am done.” So then the next quarter: another group of parents. I ended up doing the same presentation, but we never got into anything like we could dig into some topics. So that model didn’t work and I had to figure out another model. I am challenged by how to bring parents in and have the parents feel comfortable in the decision making process. . . .

Likewise, in the Prometheus school district, Principals Shields and Hart implemented night school to meet the needs of students who needed a later start to their day due to work schedules or family obligations. As described in Chapter 4, other examples of cultural responsiveness in the Prometheus district were Principal Hart’s “field trips” to students’ homes and Principal Sharp’s sit-in with her students to protest anti-immigration laws.

In the Argus District, the findings were more murky regarding culturally responsive leadership. As mentioned earlier, two of the Argus principals voiced concern for their special education students; however, aside from eliminating sweep, the
principals did not appear to implement particular structures or policies to recognize and maximize students’ cultural strengths.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the Argus principals were, indeed, responsive to the needs of their generally affluent, white, suburban students who suffered through the recession. All three Argus principals identified ways in which they had tried to assist their students through financial difficulty. For instance, Principal Sparrow of the affluent Aung San Suu Kyi High School assisted several families who lost their homes and were faced with having to change schools. Principal Sparrow helped families keep their students in school by assisting them with the open enrollment process:

>We have families now that have two or three families living in the same home. We've had our free and reduced [lunch] the highest that it’s ever been. I've counseled more parents than ever in my life from people that have lost their homes, that have moved out of district, and they come in crying and saying, “Can we stay here?” And I tell them literally, “Fill out the open enrollment. The worst thing you can do right now is to pull your kid out of school. Here's the form. I'll sign it right now you can stay. You've just lost your home. Don't pull your kid out of school. If later on once you're settled down, if you want to go to the other school, fine. Don't pull them out right now.” More than ever, you know, and sometimes they get back on their feet, and they'll get an apartment back up in the area. But that happened last year and this year more than ever.

In addition, Principal Alameda of Betty Makoni High School was responsive to families who were struggling with the recession and helped students to afford their AP exams:

>You know, we’re very cognizant of the prices of things for our activities and things like that. If they’ve lost a book or something we do payment plans. Things like that kind of help them. We forgive a lot of things if the parents will call and say, “You know, we’re having a rough time.” This year, for our AP tests, a lot of kids were coming in and canceling because they just couldn’t afford [to take the exams]. So we supplemented. Any student that came in and said, you know, “I’ve got to drop out because I—we said, ‘No we’ll pay for it.’”
Principal Knight of Carl Sagan High School recalled helping a homeless student find social services to help him continue to attend school. He also eliminated sweep on his campus to ensure his largely low-income student population was not penalized for arriving at school late when timely transportation was out of their control. In general, the findings regarding Argus principals’ cultural responsiveness suggest that the principals were responsive to their students in the ways that matched their understanding of their students’ suffering, even if their actions might not be considered culturally responsive by Gay’s (2010) definition.

**Socially Savvy Leadership**

In addition, principals who exhibited Vortex Leadership relied on social savviness to carry out their accountability-related job responsibilities, to exert their influence as needed, and to effect socially just practices. *Socially savvy leadership* is the combination of principals’ situational awareness, knowledge of their boundaries and how to stretch them, reliance on prior relationships with others, and, for lack of a better term, social “with-it-ness.” As with the previous four styles, Vortex Leaders applied their social savvy when appropriate, when worth the risk, and when aligned with their goals.

For instance, two of the principals highlighted their use of social savvy when describing how they dealt with their teachers unions. As noted earlier, teachers unions were a source of restricted principal autonomy although not necessarily accountability policy driven. Still, these examples illustrate socially savvy leadership well. In the Argus district, Principal Alameda identified having a positive relationship with her union representative as an asset when disciplining an employee:
I won’t make a decision unless I have all of the information. And, you know, with employee discipline, if the person tells me something that I hadn’t heard, you know, then I better check it out to make sure what’s right and what isn’t. I’ve been fortunate; I’ve had very good [union] reps who help, you know, that I rely on them for their judgment as well, so that’s been good. But you build those relationships with your people.

In a similar vein, Principal Shields applied socially savvy leadership when working through challenges with officers from the teachers’ union in his district:

No matter how nasty their emails are, I always respond, ‘Thank you for your feedback. I’m sorry you feel this way. I will work harder to meet your expectations. Call me if you have any concerns.’ And I could be raging angry, but I will send that email, okay. And I always—and I mean it; I do. I’m not placating. It gets them off of the email. It gets them a time to cool off, and then my thing is, sort of in a devious way: ‘You just put your cards on the table.’ Like when the Association President sends me scathing email that takes me five minutes to read. She's laid out all of her beliefs, and all of her particular issues. I have the weekend to read it and digest and figure out how I can dialogue with her versus my short three or four lines. She doesn't know where I'm coming from still; she only knows that I appreciate her feedback, and I'm going to work harder to meet her expectations.

Not only did Principal Shields display savviness in smoothing his relations with union representatives, but one of Principal Shields’s teachers noted that the principal displayed social savviness with his students to create relationships with them. Mr. Casteno recounted:

I am impressed that [Principal Shields] knows the first names of a lot of students. Last year when I taught inclusion, he knew some of my students by first name and he knew their history and their background. Some of them were—he seems to know the kids who are involved in gangs. He seems to know the ones who have police records and who've been in prisons. He seems to know them, and I find that really impressive. I don't know. I don't know to what extent he works with the Honors kids or the AP kids as well, but in terms of memorizing people's names and knowing that kind of stuff, in that regard I would say he's like genius material. It's like, ‘How do you do that?’ You know?
Also in the Prometheus District Principal Sharp used social savviness to add the advisory period to her campus schedule despite staff resistance. One of her teachers, Mr. Benchot, explained how Principal Sharp responded to the resistance:

I think [Principal Sharp] was going to just implement advisory, and a few teachers spoke up. And then she kind of stepped back and let that process happen, but kind of in the background. She had her way of communicating things. But I believe she's the type of leader that can kind of seek out—it's like, ‘Okay, I need my staff's buy-in.’ So she has a way of like letting the seed marinate.

In describing her own approach to working through the resistance, Principal Sharp illustrated “her way of communicating things” by approaching the teacher leaders whose support she expected but had not received when the discussion of advisory was brought to the whole staff. Principal Sharp expressed surprise when these key teachers voiced reservations about the advisory period whole group, despite having expressed their support of the advisory period in a smaller leadership group with the principal. Principal Sharp also displayed socially savvy leadership when she garnered support first for the advisory within a small group of teacher leaders whom the rest of the staff respected, and then rolled out the idea to the rest of the staff. However, when her teachers changed their alliance at a crucial moment, she had to exert a different kind of social savviness, the crucial conversation:

I went to those three people, one-on-one, and I talked to them, and I said—I had one of those crucial conversations—and I said, ‘I don’t understand why, if you had those objections, you didn’t bring it out when we met as a group.’ ‘Well, I didn’t think about it until later.’ ‘Okay, I understand that. Why wouldn’t you have then come to me then and talked about it before you were in the group?’ ‘Well, there wasn’t time.’ ‘Well, okay,’ I said, ‘because my sense is that when you were in the larger group, you decided which side you wanted to be on, and it was more comfortable to be on that side than it would be to be seen as an administrator because administrator bad, teacher good.’ And I said, ‘The issue there for me, and for you, is whether you are an instructional leader. Because if you are not an instructional leader, then that is something to recognize now. Because what we
need are instructional leaders, and leading means sometimes that you are out there doing what you know is the right thing to do even though others may disagree.’

In the Argus district, Principal Knight described himself as “almost like a chameleon” in working with the various people with differing interests throughout his day. In addition, he shared that he relied on relationships with district administration to understand an occasional blunder or support his initiatives:

Luckily, I had done really good work of making relationships with the district office, and I know it’s real easy to say, ‘It’s us against them,’ or ‘them at the district office,’ but I’ve always embraced that it’s ‘us.’ We’re the district. So when you need those people to rush in and save you, you want to make sure that you’ve developed relationships with those people. So when you step in it, and you will step in it—it’s inevitable—you will step in it, or it will find you some way, you want those people to rally around you. I was very lucky and fortunate that they did. . . . You will screw up, and when you do, you are going to ask for help from the very same people that you trash-talked to, and they’re going to say, ‘Have a nice day.’ So that's my take on it. I refuse to [trash talk]. Some people are harder to love. Some people I like better than others, but I'm going to make it work, and so I sometimes get labeled as ‘wishy-washy.’ I like to think of it as more of a chameleon. I have to adapt and adjust to the person or the office or situation that I'm dealing with. Not that I'm trying to mislead or anything else, but I want to make sure that I connect with that person so that I can accurately communicate my vision. So I mean, I don’t want to sound simplistic, but if people with the purse strings or the permission slips like you, you're probably going to get more thrown your way.

Socially savvy leadership appeared to be a shared quality among the six principals and as such, appeared to enable principals to accomplish their goals and fulfill their responsibilities more efficiently and positively. Building and utilizing relationships rings true as a key Vortex Leadership practice. In addition, being culturally responsive and adept in the four leadership styles cited in the Review of Literature epitomizes Vortex Leadership.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

In this final chapter of the dissertation, I review my research problem and methods to assist the reader who begins at Chapter 6. Then, the major sections of this chapter summarize my findings, discuss their implications, make recommendations for educators, and suggest additional research.

As explained in Chapter 2, this phenomenological study focused on six effective high school principals in two Arizona school districts to ascertain how accountability policies have impacted the principals’ job responsibilities, their autonomy, and their ability to pursue social justice on their campus. The goal of the study was to determine if and how principals were able to accomplish their goals for their school. As schools across Arizona worked to meet NCLB’s AYP requirement in 2010-2011, they were also labeled and sanctioned by AZ Learns. NCLB and AZ Learns were the two accountability policies considered in my study. In addition to ascertaining the degree to which principals were impacted by these policies, I examined principals’ leadership styles and practices through a Vortex Leadership Framework. The framework posits principals at the center of a vortex of varying leadership roles, interests, and external forces, including accountability, autonomy, paradox, and limited resources. To fulfill their responsibilities, including accountability paperwork, managing change, managing staff affective states, increasing student achievement, and promoting social justice, effective principals exhibited elements of each of four leadership styles: Managerial Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Transformational Leadership and Social Justice Leadership. However, the principals who appeared to thrive in the vortex exhibited culturally responsive leadership and social
savvy. Furthermore, these principals used AZ Learns and NCLB as levers to drive the changes they wished to make on their campuses.

This phenomenological study relied wholly on interviews: first of the superintendents in two school districts, then of the principals they recommended as effective school leaders, and then of three teachers from each principal’s recommendations. Each superintendent was interviewed once regarding his/her focus for the district, district challenges, and definition of effective principal leadership. Each superintendent then recommended a pool of effective principals, from which I chose three (six total). Each of the six principal participants was interviewed twice, following a modified Seidman (2006) in-depth interview structure described in Chapter 3. At the end of the second interview, each principal recommended a pool of teachers with whom they had worked on school initiatives or in leadership teams. Of these I chose three teachers (18 total) and interviewed each teacher once to corroborate or provide disconfirming evidence of what principals had shared. Not all teachers’ responses were included in the findings due to the number of findings and interviews conducted. Only those teacher interviews that reiterated principals’ responses to the three research questions or illuminated principal leadership styles were included.

All participants’ responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded using qualitative analysis software. In addition to analysis of individual principal leadership patterns, comparisons were made across districts and from school to school within the same district. Findings were categorized by research question and leadership style. A summary of the major findings follows.
Potential limitations of the study included the small sampling of districts (two in total) and high school principals (six in total). In addition, the teachers sampled were recommended by their principals, and were thus potentially more likely to have positive views of their principals’ leadership styles. Finally, during the study, I was hired as an assistant principal at one of the schools in my study. This occurred after I collected the superintendent and principal data but before I collected the teacher data. More details of my efforts to mitigate these limitations can be found in the Methodology section in Chapter 3.

**Summary of Results**

Principals’ job responsibilities appear to have increased slightly in three areas as a result of NCLB and AZ Learns. These included increased work hours for the preparation for and scheduling of testing, pressure to effect greater student achievement, and the necessity of managing school staffs’ affective states related to AZ Learns and NCLB. While principals were expected to be accessible to their school staff and parents “twenty four/seven,” district and state testing increased the time demands placed on principals and their staffs. The pressure to improve student achievement was cited by both superintendents and principals as an ongoing responsibility, but the pressure was felt to a greater degree by the two principals in Prometheus district whose schools had failed to meet AYP the preceding year. Managing staffs’ affective states was necessary when breaking bad news to a school staff in the case of receiving a failing rating or when asking staff to make significant changes to curriculum or procedures because of the deficient rating.
Contrary to my original assumptions regarding external accountability policies’ impact on principal autonomy levels, the six principals in my study did not appear to have lost significant autonomy due to accountability policies. Principals were able to use corrective action to implement structures and practices that they wanted to implement, including advisory periods, student support programs, and new curricula. Staffing was the area of least autonomy in both districts even within Title I schools, but this lack of autonomy was not due to AZ Learns or NCLB. Principals in both districts complained of staffing shortages due to funding cuts to education.

Two types of unanticipated autonomy became apparent in the Prometheus district. First, principals in Prometheus led Title I schools, and as a result, received extra funding for student intervention programs and social workers; whereas, high school principals in Argus did not receive extra funding, even though one school in the Argus district qualified as a Title I school. Second, the superintendent of the Prometheus district acknowledged that he allowed some principals more leeway in their school-based dealings, depending on how much he trusted their leadership. Principal Sharp stated that because her school had met AYP and was considered successful by the district, she was afforded more freedom than schools that were in corrective action.

The six principals in this study did not appear to be obstructed by AZ Learns or NCLB in their social justice efforts with the exception of the student who failed to graduate because he was one point short of augmentation. All of the principals in the study identified groups of students and families they were concerned about and whom

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11 Carl Sagan High School eventually did receive a social worker and Title I status two years after the study year.
they worked to assist educationally, but only the Prometheus district principals were able to define the term, *social justice* as it related to education. Among their efforts to promote social justice, Prometheus principals removed barriers to honors and advanced classes, removed low level classes across the board, instituted advisory periods, established student support groups, acquired intervention counseling software, created evening school, established parent advisory councils, and facilitated and participated in student political protests.

Once provided with a sample definition of “social justice in education,” Argus principals identified areas in which they worked to expand educational opportunities to all of their students and cited special education students and students struggling financially as groups of students they were most concerned about. One of the Argus principals removed the sweep policy in his school to prevent students, whose transportation might be out of their control, from being academically penalized.

The leadership styles exhibited by the principals in my study were reflective of those found in the Review of the Literature with two exceptions. First, some of the principals initiated the socially just practices named above as a result of *culturally responsive leadership*. In other words, they exhibited an awareness of their students’ and families’ cultural needs and acted upon them. While all principals voiced a desire to increase student achievement for all groups of students, some of the principals transcended student achievement as an end and responded directly to the cultural needs of their students and families. Examples of cultural responsiveness included Principal Sharp’s childcare for parents attending advisory meetings, Principal Hart’s and Shields’s implementation of evening school, and Principal Knight’s removal of the sweep policy.
Secondly, while my review of the literature suggested the importance of principals working collaboratively with their staffs in Transformational Leadership, the literature I reviewed did not address the social savvy required for principals working with various constituencies of people to effect the results they desired. In the six principals studied, it became apparent that they practiced a sort of social knowhow to help them navigate their leadership vortex. Principals who practiced socially savvy leadership described how it afforded them autonomy, protection, and future assistance in their endeavors. For instance, Principal Shields had mastered the art of interacting positively with union leaders which helped him ensure favorable outcomes in the quality of his teaching staff. Principal Knight used positive relationships with district office personnel to expand his campus autonomy and avert sanctions when making minor policy mistakes. Principal Sharp used social savvy when introducing the advisory period schedule change to her staff, relying on trusted teacher leaders’ public support to gain the confidence of the rest of the staff.

**Discussion**

In this study, I attempted to identify what effective principals did to successfully navigate their demanding, high stakes, paradoxical positions as leaders of diverse school communities. Within the vortex of accountability, autonomy, paradox, and limited resources, I found that the leaders who thrived appeared to be socially savvy in her relationships, culturally responsive to their students, and able to use accountability policies to their advantage. The principals I studied exhibited varying degrees of Vortex Leadership.
Vortex Leadership

Social Savviness

All six principals exhibited strong levels of social savviness, which I anticipated because they were recommended to me by their superintendents as leaders who knew how to adeptly manage their schools and communities. In addition, each leader had at least three years of principal experience, plus additional years of administrative experience before becoming principals. Both Argus and Prometheus principals mentioned the necessity of maintaining positive relationships with those above them as well as with those whom they led. Doing so bolstered their levels of autonomy and allowed them the credence and trust they needed to pursue their goals. Among the four leadership foci in my Review of Literature, the six principals in my study appeared strongest in their focus on managing their staffs’ transition through changes and in managing their staffs’ affective states, which appeared to be positively related to their levels of social savviness.

Cultural Responsiveness

On the other hand, not all of the principals exhibited strength in cultural responsiveness or confidence in social justice leadership. While the Prometheus principals cited a variety of examples of actions they took to capitalize on the cultural strengths of their students and communities and to pursue social justice, Argus principals argued that helping all of their students increase their achievement was social justice. Argus principals were receptive to helping students through the economic recession that had hit their community hard, but they demonstrated little awareness of historical educational inequity that some populations of Arizona students had endured, nor did they suggest that inequity could be occurring presently on their campuses. It is possible that
one barrier to the Argus principals’ understanding of social justice was that their schools were not comprised of a majority of minority students or students living in poverty. Carl Sagan High School came the closest to matching the student demographics of the schools in the Prometheus district, but it operated in a largely suburban community and in district that was slowly becoming more diverse. When asked if they had received district professional development in social justice awareness, the Argus principals responded that they had not. Argus superintendent responses corroborated this finding.

In contrast, in the Prometheus district, the Superintendent Lumen stated that the Prometheus district had a “social justice theme” because 76% of its students lived at or below the poverty line. Therefore, because the Argus school district leadership did not focus on social justice nor did the district have a majority of its students living in poverty, making a social justice leadership comparison between the two districts may be unfair. Still my findings suggest that in districts serving suburban students, principals may need training to recognize and address “social justice in education.”

**Using Accountability Policy to Drive Change**

The Prometheus principals leading schools in corrective action showed the most evidence of using accountability policy as a lever to drive change on their campuses. This conclusion makes sense given that staff buy-in would be greatest in those schools whose survival depended on their willingness to change. For the principals leading schools that were not in corrective action, there was less evidence that principals used accountability policy to drive their desired changes, but there still appeared to be a generalized urgency to improve student achievement and to make changes to existing practices. For instance, even though Paul Watson had made AYP, Principal Sharp still asked her staff to
implement an Advisory period and to implement a new curriculum. Furthermore, these changes were not mandated by the district.

Another point of consideration is the fact that principals and teachers appeared to funnel instructional leadership through data analysis—as opposed to discussing classroom observations or pedagogy. Is it possible that the emphasis on data analysis further narrows principals’ and teachers’ instructional autonomy? If educators focus only on what is measured and reported quantitatively, they may continue to narrow what is considered valuable to learn and know. Through a relatively innocent trust in what “the data” reveal, principals have accepted the hegemony of data-driven accountability that shapes their instructional considerations. Therefore, the “lever” of accountability may also serve as a “club” if not balanced with qualitative considerations of student and teacher needs that fall outside of quantitative data analysis.

Furthermore, as teachers’ evaluations in Arizona become linked to their students’ test scores, it is plausible that student achievement data will grow as an instructional focal point. Principals will likely have to work harder to extract good teaching from good test-taking in teacher evaluations and prescriptions for professional development.

Examples of non-accountability driven changes included Principal Knight’s elimination of sweep and zeros from teacher grading practices, Principal Shields’s intervention programs for students who broke school rules, and Principal Alameda’s and Sparrow’s efforts to remove accountability-related stresses from teachers as much as possible.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Although Aung San Suu Kyi had not met AYP during the study year, it had previously met AYP and was not in corrective action.
Researcher’s Insights

My findings have led me to develop four insights regarding accountability’s impact on principals’ job responsibilities, autonomy, and social justice efforts.

First, it appears that in addition to their myriad responsibilities, school principals are now in the business of selling change. It is true that principals have always had to ask their schools to change, but in this study, it became apparent that principals are reluctant to simply mandate change. Because they are accountable to internal school councils, student advisory groups, parent councils, and teachers unions, principals must sell their change to each group in order to pass through each gate. That is—unless the change was a mandate from the district office. For instance, in the case of the advisory period’s addition in the Prometheus school district, Principal Sharp hoped that the district would make the advisory period a mandate in order to avoid having to pass through each gatekeeper group. Ironically, if Paul Watson High School had been in corrective action, she might have had more leverage to institute such a large change at her school because the urgency of corrective action provides some justification for change.

Each principal in the study led his/her staff through some type of structural or philosophical change. Even the principals of the schools that were not undergoing corrective action were in the midst of large-scale change. Principal Sharp’s school was implementing a new curriculum and testing program in addition to adding the advisory period. Principal Knight’s school was adjusting to a new grading program that eliminated zeros. Principal Alameda’s and Sparrow’s schools were implementing a school-wide system for tracking and posting student progress. Principal Hart’s school was undertaking
a new curriculum. Principal Shields’s school was implementing a responsive student support system, a new curriculum, and an advisory period.

Second, while AZ Learns and NCLB may have added some additional complexities, pressure, and time required to principals’ workloads the six principals in this study appeared to be up to the challenge, even if it meant longer schedules and shorter vacations. These policies did not appear to limit their autonomy or ability to pursue social justice. It was the local restraints that most limited principals’ autonomy. These included the school board rejecting Principal Knight’s request for a social worker, district staffing formulas that were the same for all schools in the district, Principal Sharp’s difficulty in gaining approval for buying Netbooks for her school because other schools in the district did not have them, and teachers’ union agreements regarding who could transfer to a school and how often teachers could be absent. These local restraints appeared to limit principals’ autonomy more than state and national policies appeared to. However, the principals’ use of social savviness appeared to increase their autonomy under local constraints as well.

Third, many external accountability policies, whether AZ Learns or district accountability mechanisms, appeared to lack responsiveness and flexibility for unique school or student needs. In general, the accountability policies principals navigated were rigid and applied to their schools without consideration of their school’s challenges or accomplishments in other areas. This can be seen in Principal Shields’s frustration that while he improved his whole sophomore class’s achievement in reading, writing, and math by 10%, because two subgroups did not meet proficiency, the school failed to make AYP. This can also be seen in the state-labeled “Excelling” Aung San Suu Kyi High...
School that failed to meet AYP in the same year because two special education math students had not passed the test. And what of the Congolese refugee student who was denied a high school diploma by one point?

These examples remind us that many external accountability mechanisms coldly mete out their consequences equally. In social justice studies, we learn that equality is not the same as equity. To overlay “equality” on top of unequal structures may exacerbate inequality. While the principals in Prometheus school district were able to use their Title I money to assist their students socially, emotionally, and academically, Principal Knight of the Argus district was not allowed differentiated staffing because none of the high schools in the district were allowed differentiated staffing. One of the teachers at Carl Sagan High School told me they had been faced with record numbers of students dealing with untreated mental illness. In my own position as an assistant principal, I have dealt with several students who struggled with mental illness and families who were in denial or who did not have the means to help their children. Who wouldn’t want a social worker? Thus, while the principals in this study may have risen to their challenges as leaders, they could have been aided in their efforts by accountability policies that took into consideration their contexts, their successes, and their strengths.

And finally, the findings reiterate yet again, that money does matter. The schools that received extra funding were able to provide a range of student services and supports unparalleled in education historically. The principals of the Prometheus schools were able to address some of their students’ social, emotional, physical and academic needs that principals in other districts were not able to. It is true that Title I schools direly need this funding and that students in non-Title schools are usually able to have their social,
emotional, and physical needs met by their community and family resources. But there are many children in districts like Argus who do not have these needs met either. And while I would not suggest schools in affluent neighborhoods be funded equally to schools in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, I would suggest that increasing school funding be a reasonable response to any society demanding of schools what is currently demanded of them. Charged with addressing the bulk of social ills, public schools in the United States have become the go-to providers of services not guaranteed by sectors that would otherwise supply them in most developed societies.

In terms of increasing student achievement, while it must remain a central focus, it will not truly be a societal priority until schools are properly funded as well. We cannot yell, “College and career readiness for all!” and then force principals and their staffs to cut advanced placement and honors classes because they do not have the staffing allotment needed to teach them. College and career readiness costs. A society that demands college and career ready graduates needs to step up and pay for them.

**Relationship of the Current Study to Prior Research**

Previous studies of principal autonomy have contradicted each other regarding principals’ autonomy to select and retain qualified teachers (Abernathy, 2007; Papa & Baxter, 2008). My study echoes contradictory findings in that in the Argus school district, principals felt autonomous in selecting their teaching staff while principals in Prometheus did not. This contrast was due to the agreement made between the Prometheus district and the teachers union. Where the Prometheus policy for transfers was cited by Principals Shields and Hart as limiting their autonomy in hiring, in the Argus district, principals did
not cite this limitation. This suggests that staffing autonomy varies from district to
district, depending on its agreement with local teachers unions or other local factors.

This study also reiterates Oakes et al.’s (2000) study that de-tracking and
expanding access to rigorous classes was a desirable leadership goal for principals who
wanted to increase the educational opportunities of students who have been underserved
in the past. Oakes et al. (2000) found that de-tracking and eliminating barriers to honors
and AP classes resulted in increased academic achievement by the untracked students.
While this study did not examine the achievement effects of principals’ actions to expand
access to their students, principals, all six principals cited expanding access to honors and
AP classes, removing barriers, and improving the quality of curriculum as desirable for
their schools.

In addition, Skrla (2003) studied principals’ implementation of accountability
policies and found that many successful principals used accountability policies as
“levers” for change. My findings also included evidence that principals in corrective
action used their testing results and failure to meet AYP as rationale for implementing
changes in their schools that might have been met with resistance without the policy
forcing the need for change. These were generally changes that would benefit students in
schools that did make AYP as well, such as student intervention programs, new curricula,
and advisory periods.

**Implications for Policy**

External accountability measures—in whatever form the ghost of accountability
future foreshadows—may tax principals’ schedules and resources, but future
accountability policies may also allow principals some extra credibility and justification
in facilitating their desired changes. Although this is one study of six high school
principals in two districts, it appears that principal autonomy is alive and well in Arizona
public high schools. The principals studied were smart to use their NCLB-backed
credibility to ask their staffs to make significant changes to certain old and ineffective
practices. If other Arizona principals possess the Vortex Leadership qualities that the six
principals in this study did, they will likely be able to integrate new accountability
mechanisms into their own goals. Ideally, these goals would include pursuing social
justice in their schools.

The fact that principals in the Argus district were unfamiliar with the term *social
justice* suggests that social justice as a leadership responsibility is still “soft policy” as
Marshall and Ward (2004) concluded. It was not that principals in the Argus district did
not want to pursue social justice; it was that they had not been exposed to the terminology
or that their district leaders did not provide training in social justice leadership. This
finding points to the possibility that principals would benefit from more exposure to
social justice and its implications for their leadership. An obvious place to situate this
instruction would be in principal training programs, but I would argue that social justice
discourse is not the sole responsibility of leadership preparation programs. As school
districts across the nation become more diverse—or less diverse as re-segregation
occurs—principals and teachers need to initiate and sustain discussions of race, privilege,
and equity as these factors play significant role in efforts to de-track, include, and
equalize access to rigorous classes.

In many district professional development trainings, book studies and guest
speakers are the vehicles for principal development. Districts would do well to integrate
book studies and guest speakers centered around social justice topics, whether focusing on the inclusion of special education students, the residual effects of poverty and race upon many students’ current educational experiences, de-tracking, social justice leadership, and culturally responsive teaching. Such actions would increase principal understanding of social justice and identify it as a valued practice worthy of time, discussion, and effort.

Recommendations for Further Research

As schools across the nation go through restructuring efforts to comply with NCLB, an apt study would examine to what degree these restructurings have impacted the schools’ student achievement. Specifically, in Arizona schools such as Esther Chaves Cano High School or Paul Farmer High School, an examination of the impact of the new curriculum, advisory periods, and interventions would help policy makers to decide if restructuring is accomplishing the ends that were intended. Did restructuring efforts help the students to pass AIMS who were unsuccessful before restructuring?

This study did not address elementary school principals’ experiences with accountability policies. A valuable research study might continue this research to examine the impact of accountability policy upon elementary and middle school principals’ job responsibilities, autonomy, and ability to pursue social justice. Furthermore, while this study did not examine gender differences between the male and female principals’ experiences, an examination of gender upon leadership styles within accountability and the vortex of educational leadership would also offer interesting insights for researchers interested in gender study.
Re-segregating schools, indefinite funding cuts to education, and a dubious accountability policy future in Arizona provide the currents which may enable additional Vortex Leaders to emerge in public schools. As the job of the high school principal demands more time, vision, and leadership skill, it is possible that only the hearty need apply. Luckily, in Arizona, there are those who have accepted this challenge, who apply their social savvy to effect positive changes, who are culturally responsive, and who have at heart, their students. They are my inspiration.

Vortex Leaders do not emerge fully formed. They grow and learn and acquire their skills through experience and trials. It is the responsibility, then, of those of us who are invested in their success to support their efforts, to facilitate their growth, and to ensure that they have the autonomy they need to hire high quality, caring teachers, acquire sufficient resources and support personnel, and respond to the emotional, social, and academic needs of their students.

My decision to follow in my father’s shoes as a school leader has allowed me to peer into the vortex firsthand. Whether or not I stay in this profession will depend largely on the difference I think I could make as a principal despite state and national trends toward standardization and focus on outcomes over student well-being. Thankfully, if I chose to, I would be in good company working alongside educators such as those in my study who seek to “repair the worlds” (Bogotch et al., 2008) of the young people who trust them.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Superintendents

1. Can you describe your district’s demographics?

2. What is your district’s educational philosophy or focus?

3. What route did you take to the job of superintendent?

4. How long have you been a superintendent? (If since before 2001, then “How has the superintendency changed since NCLB and AZ learns?”)

5. What is your opinion of NCLB and AZ Learns? Are there aspects of these policies you support or don’t support?

6. Are there parts of your job where you wish you had more influence?

7. What do you consider an “effective school principal”?

8. Can you recommend five principals in your district who you consider “effective leaders” with five years of experience, who represent male, female, and different racial groups?

9. Why do you consider these leaders effective? (Explain to superintendent that I will select 1-2 principals from these 5.)

Principals

Interview 1 (“Focused Education and Leadership History” and “Details of the Experience”)

1. Can you describe your educational history, including your own experience in schools as a student? What do you remember most about school?

2. I have read about principals coming to the position through many different paths and for many different reasons. For instance, many were teachers who wanted to
have a greater influence on schools. Some were encouraged by their own leaders to become a principal. What was your path to the principalship?

3. How long were you a teacher? What did you teach? Where? What was your view of the principalship? Has this view changed now that you are a principal?

4. Much attention has been paid to principal preparation programs and internships to adequately prepare principals. What experiences prepared you to be a principal? Were there experiences or situations you were unprepared for?

5. Can you think of a situation early in your principal career that you struggled with and would handle differently now?

6. Education has changed substantially since the time I began teaching in 1991. How has the principalship changed during the time you have been a principal?

7. How have NCLB and AZ Learns affected your job?

8. Have you noticed any changes in your autonomy as a principal since NCLB? How so?

9. I imagine that your day is quite packed with responsibilities. Can you describe a typical day as principal?

10. What kinds of decisions do you make on a daily basis? What are some that you have to make without all of the information you need?

11. What are some of your school’s greatest challenges? What are your school’s greatest assets?

12. Talk to me a little about your school community. Are there students you are specifically concerned about? Are their certain groups of students who struggle academically or socially? Have you dealt with racial tensions? Bullying?
13. I know that as a classroom teacher, there are some things I have control over and some things that I do not have control over. As a principal, what types of things do you feel you have control over here?

14. So you have control over ________. What kinds of things do you not have control over?

15. Can you describe a situation or two where you were able to work around some of those things you did not have control over?

16. If you could change three things about your school, what would they be and why? Do you have a plan to change them? What are the obstacles?

Interview 2 (Reflection on the Meaning)

1. Last time we talked about your daily responsibilities, some of the issues you deal with as principal, and what you would do if you could make any changes you saw fit. You mentioned that you would like to ______. Why don’t you?

2. Given what you said about the things you can control as a principal and the things you cannot, what is your philosophy about making changes?

3. Why do you continue trying to ______?

4. Do you see social justice as one of the responsibilities of the principal?

5. How do you define “social justice”?

6. Can you give examples of social justice you’ve seen or been a part of?

7. Can you reflect on how the role of the principal has changed over time? How/Why has it changed?

8. How does the current role of the principal compare to how you first perceived of the role?
9. What does it mean to “be a principal”? Why are you a principal?

**Teachers**

1. If you reflect back on your own schooling, how would you characterize your experience in school? What do you remember most about school?

2. Can you describe a typical day in your life as a teacher?

3. Is there a widely shared vision or mission here? How is it communicated to the staff?

4. How do you find out about district policies? How are they communicated to you?

5. Do school staff have input into how policies are implemented?

6. Are there certain policies that are a priority at this school?

7. What is your perception of how NCLB and AZ learns have been implemented at this school?

8. What have been some challenges or issues your staff has dealt with?

9. How did your staff and leaders deal with these challenges?

10. What areas do you think the principal would like to improve here at _____?

11. Can you describe the role that social justice plays at _____?

12. Can you give an example of an instance where your school was challenged by a social justice issue and how your principal and staff dealt with it?