

A Qualitative Case Study of How a Title I High School Principal Strategized for Student Achievement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze a high performing Georgia Title I high school principal who has participated in school improvement efforts at his assigned school where school-wide student achievement has improved significantly under his leadership. Purposeful sampling

methods were used to choose a principal of a Georgia Title I high school. The chosen principal led his school to improvements in student achievement, including a 20% increase in graduation rate and an 18-point increase in the Georgia CCRPI score. The study's findings determined numerous methods the principal used to increase student achievement at the Title I high school. Teacher participants and the principal discussed how the culture established at the school played a vital role in the school's turn around. The principal was touted for his clear communication style and for supporting those around him. The principal encouraged his teachers to innovate instructional practices and also initiated an alternative center to directly help students who were short on credits to accelerate their learning, which directly affected the graduation rate at the school.

Critics have identified issues with the American education system for decades. President Lyndon Johnson initiated the federal government's involvement in ensuring success for all students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed in 1965, was the first federal attempt to bring equality to schools ("Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)," n.d.).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education developed a 683-page document entitled *A Nation at Risk*, outlining the mediocrity present in American education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Since that time, a great deal of educational research has been conducted, and society itself has continued to evolve and change, but the overall success of schooling and student achievement has not made significant improvement (Peterson, 2010).

The No Child Left Behind Act was a subsequent iteration enacted in 2001. This act challenged schools at a different level and held them accountable for student progress as evidenced on standardized test scores ("Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)," n.d.). The accountability enacted within the law also began to change the requirements of the principal. The openness and public availability of school data challenged principals to become better instructional leaders (Tavakolian & Howell, 2012).

During this time, Georgia schools were also facing more accountability measures, and in 2000, with the election of Governor Roy Barnes, there was a call for improved leadership in both districts and schools (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2016). In 2002, Governor Barnes named a special committee, the Georgia Institute for School Improvement that began the task of collecting research and forming best practices for leaders within the state. Even with these efforts, there have not been drastic improvements in education for Georgia students (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2016).

The state uses the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) accountability system to compute an annual grade for high schools based on overall achievement, school progress, and improvements made on reducing the achievement gap. Extra points are given for progress made with students who are economically disadvantaged, English language learners, or students with disabilities. This system began in 2012. That year, the state average score for high schools was 73; in 2013, it moved to 72; in 2014, the score plummeted to 68.4, which by the scale would signify a failing state score. Since 2014, there has been some progress, with scores of 75.8 in 2015, 75.7 in 2016, and 77 in 2017. However, the formula for scoring continues to be restructured by the Georgia Department of Education, which can make year-to-year comparisons difficult ("College and Career Performance Index," 2017).

Although the state has shown some gains in graduation rates from 2012-2016, 20 % of students are dropping out of high school (“Downloadable Data,” n.d.). Many graduates are finding themselves unprepared for college, career, and life (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) showed only 39.4% of students who began their four-year programs in 2007 had completed degrees by 2011. Also, statewide data from the 2011-2012 school year to the 2016-2017 school year showed no significant gains in SAT or ACT scores. Both indicators show no progress in student achievement was made as a result of the state’s initiatives (“Downloadable Data,” n.d.).

Research Questions

The following research questions were formed to guide this study:

- RQ1:** What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I high school principal prior to and while implementing school-wide student achievement efforts?
- RQ2:** What barriers did a high-performing, Title I high school principal face while implementing school-wide student achievement improvement efforts?
- RQ3:** What strategies were used by an identified, high-performing Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement at an identified Georgia Title I high school?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify a high-performing Georgia Title I principal who has participated in school improvement efforts and has made significant improvements in student achievement. The study included efforts to determine the lived experiences of the identified principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies the principal used to deal with the complexities of improving school-wide student achievement.

Significance

This study may benefit organizations responsible for creating policies and programs focusing on principal development to include the United States Department of Education, state departments of education, university and college principal leadership development programs, and regional education service agencies responsible for principal leadership development programs. Local school districts may use the findings of this study to better prepare future school principals and practicing school principals. Individual school principals may use these findings to initiate school improvement strategies at their assigned schools.

Fullan (2008b), Karp (2006), and Williamson (2011) indicated a strong correlation between successful schools and successful principals. Therefore, analyzing the strategies used by a successful principal may garner valuable data for multiple stakeholders in the educational field. The data may be used to assist principals engaged in school change, as well as larger organizations such as school systems, that train principals to improve student achievement.

Methodology

This study identified the experiences of a Title I high school principal, the barriers he faced, and the strategies he used to increase student achievement at his school. A single qualitative case study methodology was used in this study. Stake (1995) argued for the importance of the single case. He noted each case entails its own specifics and complexities, and functions on its own. Purposeful sampling procedures were used to identify the principal with a record of exceptional school leadership.

Once the principal was identified, several data collection methods were used to answer the research questions. These included Siedman's (2013) three-interview series technique and the participant-as-observer method of taking field notes, which originated with Gold (1958) and was used by Wolcott (1973). One interview each with three teachers identified from snowball sampling was also conducted. School documents and data were collected from the research site to get a full view of how and why the principal strategized as he did. Data comparative methods were used for analysis; all data were analyzed by coding, and analytic memos were created and ultimately put into themes to provide more evidence to answer the research questions. The data were then scribed into a narrative that reflected the findings of the process. This final narrative responded to the research questions, explaining the lived experiences of the principal, what barriers the principal faced, and what strategies he used to increase student achievement at the research site (Patton, 2002). *A pseudonym was used for the principal and the school in the study to protect the privacy of all involved in the study.*

Limitations

Subjectivity was the first threat to data addressed. In order to combat subjectivity, the researcher must continuously remind one's self of their own biases and search for ways to recognize these thoughts as they arise. It would be impossible to simply turn off previous experiences as a researcher; in fact they must be addressed as they occur to come to clearer understandings of what is being observed.

Peshkin (1988) suggested one can accomplish this task by identifying his or her "subjective I's," which can help ensure researchers make decisions about the biases they may have with various subjects or circumstances. The researcher's deep-seated beliefs were addressed by creating his own "subjective I's." First were the researcher's beliefs about instruction. This belief was how a student-centered learning environment is paramount to the success of students. The second belief the researcher focused on is in relation to the complexity of schools. The researcher believed complex environments must be dealt with from leadership in non-linear ways to increase student achievement.

While focusing on what specific strategies and methods for instructional leadership the principal employed at his school, the researcher emphasized what was identified as his "Learning I," or his predetermined biases on what strategies should be employed to improve student achievement from an instructional basis. The other "subjective I" focused on what was termed his "Complexity I." The researcher held strong beliefs that linear leadership practices cannot be effective in complex human environments, which would include most secondary education

environments. The researcher determined and anticipated when these beliefs arrived and came to terms with these feelings, which allowed him to keep an open mind.

With the research methods selected, the researcher did not discount the effect reactivity had on the study. Maxwell (2013) stated when observing others, the researcher's presence actually plays much less of an influence on the participant than the research setting itself. The author asserted reactivity is not a serious threat under these circumstances. The researcher's participant-observer status derived from Wolcott (1973) did not induce a great deal of worry in how the principal reacted with my observing him in his environment. However, Maxwell (2013) contended the interviews conducted absolutely were susceptible to reactivity as "what the informant says is *always* influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation" (p. 125). The interviewer influencing the interview is unavoidable. Preparation, not asking leading questions, and an understanding of how the interview was being influenced by the setting, the line of questioning, and the way questions were asked helped to eliminate interviewer's influence on the participant. Siedman (2013) offered some clear ideas on specific techniques to help with reactivity. These techniques were used in this research and included listening more and talking less, asking open-ended questions, and asking the subject to tell a story.

Methods utilized in data collection reduced or eliminated the limitations outlined in the study (Siedman, 2013). The intentional collection of rich data eliminated many limitations. The first step taken to collect rich data included a series of interviews with the principal. Multiple interviews on different dates provided opportunities within the interview process to gain clarity by giving the principal chances to both clarify and expand upon the information given. The series began in interview one, in which the researcher gained background information about the principal and his life experiences. Interview two explored specifically how he obtained his vision for the site and his view of his influence on the research site from the strategies he implemented for student achievement. A third interview allowed the principal to talk about his plan to continue positive school growth and reflect on the meaning of what has occurred in his work. Following this model for interviews provided a clear opportunity to collect a wealth of data and the opportunity to delve deeper and ask for further clarity and explanation. Respondent validation was key to collecting both rich and clear data. The interview process provided the opportunity to have the subject validate what he meant and clarify understanding.

Field notes taken while conducting observations of the principal also contributed to the depth of the study. The length of time spent with the principal offered insight into how the principal worked in a variety of situations. The observations provided the opportunity to make clearer inferences and connections to the indirect strategies the principal used to improve student achievement at this school.

Results

Research Questions—Final Findings

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of a high-performing, Title I principal prior to and while implementing student achievement efforts? Mr. Rainey and the interviewer began the conversation about his life by going back to his childhood in New York City. When it came to his experience in high school, he looked back with a sense of regret over wasted opportunities. Mr. Rainey stated: "New York City has some very good public high schools, but I didn't really take super advantage of that." He further stated that at the time,

“Education was not something that I valued.” These experiences helped shape him into the man and principal he is today. He wants students in his school to relish the high school experience. He wants the students to feel a connection to their school. He stated: “I think the key is the relational aspect with the kids.”

Mr. Rainey’s initial career trajectory meandered into various professional enterprises before he settled into the field of education. His first adult job was restaurant management in the fine dining industry in New York. When he grew tired of this lifestyle, he then tried his hand at ministry, but to no avail. He soon realized ministry was not for him but working with young people was. He wanted to continue to work with students and discovered a passion for helping kids that eventually led him to a K-12 education career. He went back to school for education, taught for five years, and then began his work in school administration where he has remained.

Mr. Rainey explained the relational side of school administration is what attracted him to the work. He spoke about how a previous superintendent helped him learn how important the relational side of the job functioned. He stated: “I learned relational things and how to handle this community.” He saw himself as a servant leader and his job as a way to serve the teachers, the students, and their parents. Connections can be made from his leadership style and the characteristics Spears (2004) outlined for servant leadership. Mr. Rainey shared many of Spears’ (2004) characteristics, including listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, a commitment to the growth of people, and building community. He was optimistic for his school and envisioned the school continually improving to better accommodate students and their varying needs. He added how many of opportunities provided at Elway High School “have allowed them [students] to get exposed to things in high school that they probably wouldn’t have at another school.”

Another realm Mr. Rainey believed he was strong in was the area of budgeting and finance for his school. He stated: “I learned a lot about the funding side. I felt I knew a lot about the way QBE and FTE worked, and over the years, I have gotten a good understanding about how to not leave money on the table.” He stated how these understandings often helped him when he wanted to make changes at the school because one of the first areas people would question would be the cost. He could use his knowledge to persuade others, a characteristic Spears (2004) identified as a characteristic of servant leadership. He explained, “If you don’t understand the funding, then you can’t defend what it is that you want to do.”

When asked how he would explain his job to people Mr. Rainey said it was “probably like a circus master.” We both laughed, but he believed most school administrators would often feel this way. He also explained he attempted “to maintain a professional but yet relaxed relationship with teachers.” It was apparent through observations he trusted his teachers and ensured they had the resources they needed to do their jobs. I saw this trust first-hand when the county curriculum director was unsure if his teachers were going to come through with preparing for individual curriculum meetings. Mr. Rainey insisted they would be fine and followed up with some teachers to prove he was right. The teachers had followed through with what they needed to do.

Mr. Rainey also agreed his relationships with his superiors have always been important and played a vital role in his success (Hock, 1999). He stated he wanted to maintain a relationship where “I’m getting to know how the system works in all facets, including finance or state rules, state board rules, and policies and procedures. So I’ve tried to maintain a positive relationship there.” He felt it was important to have knowledge of how the system worked from multiple levels and believed these understandings often helped him to do his job better. He also

believed it important to “keep his or her phone from ringing.” He believed the superintendent not getting phone calls and visits from parents, teachers, or others who had concerns from his school was a sign he was doing his job more effectively. He believed his superiors respected the fact he did not make their jobs more difficult. Through these efforts, Mr. Rainey has had a leadership experience where he led a school that has shown growth in academic achievement. The school’s graduation rate has increased more than 20 percentage points, and the CCRPI score has increased 18 points during his tenure as principal. The 2017 CCRPI score of 86.2 ranks his school in the top five Title I schools in Georgia in academic achievement.

RQ2: What barriers did the high-performing, Title I principal face in his job while implementing student achievement improvement efforts? Sarason (1982) contended principals may be seeing more barriers in their work than should be warranted. He noted studies in which principals saw they were given too many limitations by their districts, when in reality, other principals in the district were doing atypical school procedures. He encouraged principals to think through barriers to their plans, to have a distinct knowledge of the system they worked in, and to be bold in their moves for change, not letting perceived barriers be the reason for stagnancy. Mr. Rainey has faced his share of barriers. My research supports that he found ways to overcome the barriers he faced within the confines of his system. Through a distinct thought process and the ability to anticipate problems, as well as sometimes pulling back and rethinking problems, he has managed to successfully overcome obstacles and to lead his school to a superior state ranking in CCRPI score. The major barriers he faced included relating and dealing with all stakeholders, the complexities involved with increasing student achievement at a Title I school, being an outsider leading change in a small community, dealing with a very involved board of education, and facing numerous changes above him in the superintendent position.

Fullan (2003) asserted, “One of the great strengths one needs, especially in troubled times, is a strong sense of moral purpose” (p. 19). When Mr. Rainey was first asked how he dealt with the barriers he faced in his job, he responded, “You have to remain true to your values and what you are going to do.” One of the first things he mentioned was, “getting people to do what you’ve asked them to do.” He also discussed parents who were unwilling to hold their students accountable for grades and behavior. He stated that clear communication and staying the course were the best tactics to deal with these types of barriers. The teachers interviewed credited his communication style for many of the positive things that have happened at the school. Teacher 3 explained how she believed Mr. Rainey dealt with barriers: “I think it just comes back to [his] willingness to work with people and invest in people and to try and come up with a common ground.”

Bolman and Deal (2003) outlined frames leaders can follow. Many of Mr. Rainey’s challenges fall under Bolman and Deal’s (2003) organizational frame, which requires the leader to negotiate and build strong relationships with all stakeholders. One such barrier Mr. Rainey discussed included issues that occurred immediately after he was first named principal of the K-12 school. This barrier was a system-induced obstacle that had to be faced. He initially shared the news how, as the new principal, the board would not be replacing his job as assistant principal. This setback left the principal to run a K-12 school not in the same building and with one assistant principal. According to Mr. Rainey, this ruined what should have been a celebratory night with his officially becoming a principal to a night filled with worry and frustration. He said this forced him, however, to become the principal. He stated he had to take his circumstances, re-think the situation, and make the best scenario he could. He found ways to

deal with this situation, which required some creative thinking such as making a teacher with a leadership degree the dean of students at the high school.

Mr. Rainey and other participants also saw the board of education's level of involvement at the school as a barrier at times. He faced the situation of making recommendations for positions with people he believed were the best for the job, and then having those people overlooked by the board for people they preferred. This was very frustrating for the principal. He felt slighted by the board. He explained how he felt at the time, "If you want me to be the principal, let me be the principal, and don't make me accountable for the performance if I can't pick the performer." But again, when faced with frustrations, the principal stated he would "just recalibrate my plan." He reiterated that it is the leader's job to find a way with the resources provided to make the situation the best possible for the students.

As Fullan (2003) warned: "The principal of the future must lead a complex learning organization by helping to establish new cultures in schools that have deep capacities to engage in continuous problem solving and improvement" (p. 28). When given complex and frustrating situations, Mr. Rainey did just that. He problem solved and rethought situations to get the best out of them and continued down the path of improving the school. Any perceived setback can be an opportunity in organizational leadership if it can be thought about in the right perspective (Singh, 2016).

Mr. Rainey had established himself as a trusted and respected servant leader in his organization. When faced with complexities, mainly complexities of a political nature, Mr. Rainey would not have to win people over because of the trust already established. Structural and innovative changes within the school occurred throughout the many changes in district leadership. Mr. Rainey, who had established himself as a servant leader and gained trust, had both the foresight to understand what improvements needed to be made, as well as the power of persuading both teachers and the new leadership on how structural changes would move the school forward. He moved to a four-by-four block schedule, giving his students more opportunities per year to gain credits and in turn helping to increase graduation rates. He also introduced a new bell schedule that started the school day earlier and gave students more opportunities in the afternoons to find jobs and participate in extra-curricular activities. Further, he established the alternative center during this time to help push students toward graduation and increase the graduation rate by 20 percentage points, all of which helped to increase student achievement at the school.

RQ3: What strategies were used by an identified, high-performing Title I high school principal to deal with the complexities of improving student achievement at a high school in the state of Georgia? Mr. Rainey, both directly and in some ways indirectly, strategized for student success at Elway High School. His collective vision of where the school was headed has changed under his tenure, but from the beginning, rigorous instruction, student engagement, and strong relationships between students and teachers have been a focus in his efforts to increase student achievement at a Title I high school.

Mr. Rainey's leadership has had some lasting impacts on Elway High School. There were strong connections to what was seen at the school and the work of Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006). The authors described when school organizations are in positive change modes, there will be a focus on what they termed as the "triple P core components" that are personalization, precision, and professional learning. Through a study of the principal, it appeared there were strong efforts to personalize the education of the school's students. There were opportunities for

students to make decisions about how and when they received their education and opportunities for students to determine the pace at which they wanted to work to finish school. For instance, students who wanted to accelerate their learning were given multiple opportunities to take dual enrollment classes. The students were given the opportunity to accomplish this online as well as within the traditional school environment. Students who were not successful and lacked credits were given the opportunity to accelerate their learning by taking hybrid and online classes that may have allowed them to graduate on time with their peers. Mr. Rainey notes that “doubling up for just one block would help [students] see the writing on the wall . . . I can get out!” There was also precision in what he determined were focal points for his faculty to work on. He stressed the ongoing use of data and provided multiple opportunities for teachers to receive professional learning to support them in their efforts to work on specific instructional and relational strategies to support student growth.

Another focus Mr. Rainey initiated was the use of school data to move the school forward. Arnold et al. (2006) stated an effective principal will both use and encourage teachers to understand data to make changes. Mr. Rainey believed if he were to make progress on state scores, teachers needed to first understand the process of CCRPI. He tasked teachers in groups with analyzing state testing data and coming up with plans for how they could make improvements in these areas. He stated: “So, I selected at the high school level . . . several teachers, one from every department, and said you’ve got to become the expert.” Teachers stated they believed this use of data also initiated more data use on a daily basis by other teachers as well. This increased data use allowed them to make more decisions in real time with formative assessments that help increase student achievement. Teacher 1 explained, “That’s when you are really going to be able to meet the goals that you need to . . . [and] help students succeed.”

Hock (1999) suggested that leaders should spend specific time on this task working with their superiors to build organizational trust and collaboration. In line with this, Mr. Rainey strove to take the time needed to form relationships with superintendents in the district. He has worked for four different superintendents in his time as principal, and even more in his time in a leadership role. To have survived, much less thrived as his organization has, he has had to work at forming these relationships, communicating and at times defending his vision and choices in decision-making. He also learned to support the superintendents with other staff and the community.

Mr. Rainey has also made many efforts to work continually on the culture of the school. One of the first things he mentioned he believed strongly in when he first became principal was hiring the right people and putting them in the right spots. Hiring was directly related to one of his first barriers when the board of education undermined some of his initial personnel choices. According to Cranston (2012), principals play a vital role in creating their schools’ cultures, and one of the most remarkable ways they can do this is through hiring decisions. It was evident through his early tensions with the board over teacher hires that Mr. Rainey thought long and hard about hiring decisions, and he strategically looked for people who shared his vision. He stated: “I’ve always had this idea of recruiting the best and putting them in the right seat.”

Thematic Conclusions

The following text reflects the themes developed from the data to answer the research

questions. The themes will be looked at from the principal's perspective and the perspective of teacher participants, and at times their views will be compared and contrasted. Themes represent separate, individual concepts. Some ideas and practices from the data may cross multiple themes.

Vision

Mr. Rainey presented himself as a visionary leader who used innovative practice to move his school forward. He showed the ability to interconnect the whole of the school, to address many of the systematic problems, and to create breakthroughs through innovative practice. Teachers saw his vision of the school as a place where students were strongly engaged in the curriculum, and teachers used innovative practices to facilitate student learning. Teachers also perceived how a strong part of his overall goals for the school had to do with culture, the relationships between stakeholders, and holding all personnel accountable for the well-being of students.

Mr. Rainey perceived his leadership through a visionary prism. Horth and Buchner (2014) advocated for leaders to innovate in order to positively move their organizations in today's complex world. They claimed leaders can be held directly attributable for a climate of creativity within their organizations and must act in innovative ways for positive change to occur. One direct way Mr. Rainey began innovative practice at his school was by addressing the needs of struggling learners and creating the alternative center for students. He believed this strategy to be one of the most impactful he implemented at the school. He stated how impactful it was to ". . . catch kids up through the alternative center" to "help them graduate on time." The center's focus was helping students get caught up with credits in innovative ways, including online and hybrid classes. These innovative practices directly influenced student achievement, helping Elway High School's graduation rate improve from 73 percent to 96 percent in 2016. Mr. Rainey understood the problem with the graduation rate and had vision and initiative to solve a complex problem in an innovative way.

Relationships / Communication

Teacher participants saw Mr. Rainey as a strong communicator who understood value in the relationships established at the school. He explained how he was drawn to the relational side of the work. He achieved gains in student achievement by using clear communication of goals, directness, and caring for others and their development. These focuses led to trust being built within the school. Teachers focused on his communication style and how he related to and encouraged others to collaborate within the school. Teachers believed trust was gained from his clear communication and his ability to listen and encourage input from others.

All teacher participants agreed communication is one of the most important elements a school leader should master. Luthra and Dayiha (2015) agreed that, of all qualities a good leader should possess, precise communication is vital. Teacher 3 agreed good principals are going to be good communicators and good listeners. The teachers admired Mr. Rainey's excellent communication style. Teacher 2 stated: "This principal, I will have to say, is great when it comes to communication." Luthra and Dayiha also agreed listening is an important key to communicating: "The best communicators always have a unique quality of listening peacefully to what others are speaking" (pg. 44). Teachers believed Mr. Rainey's open-door policy and his ability to listen to their concerns supported a positive school culture. Teacher 2 stated Mr. Rainey

is “very understanding” and that she was “able to go talk to [him] as a friend.” She continued that he was “always there to offer support.”

When asked about how he relates to teachers, the principal stated he strived to maintain “a professional yet relaxed relationship with teachers.” He continued, “They’ll be heard. They may not get what they want, but they will definitely be heard.” The belief he should be the one who gets teachers what they need to do their jobs was also a strong motivational factor for the principal. He said he makes a constant effort to check in with teachers during the day. He believed it went a long way in building up a sense of trust between him and the teachers. Beslin and Reddin (2004) concurred “building trust in an organization’s leadership requires a personal effort on the part of the leaders themselves” (p. 1). Mr. Rainey took the time and made the personal effort to ensure there was a trusting relationship between him and the teachers. He stated he also made it a point to come back to teachers after disciplining their students. He said he wanted the teachers to know he desired the issue resolved, and if it was not yet resolved, he needed to know where he could continue to intervene. In describing how he leads, he stated: “I know I can’t be friends with everybody; that’s not what I’m here for, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t be friendly in my approach.”

Rigor / Instructional Practice

Mr. Rainey was an instructional leader in the school who worked with teachers in order to increase rigor and improve instructional practice. He also worked to personalize school experiences for students. Teachers perceived Mr. Rainey as the instructional leader of the school. They commended his strong efforts to assist teachers in improving classroom practice, as well as his efforts to encourage and support innovative practice among teachers.

Daresh and Playko (1995) posited how good instructional leaders will display behaviors which may include setting clear goals, managing curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources, and evaluating teachers regularly to promote student learning and growth. Instructional leadership was a realm Mr. Rainey admitted he had to work at. Being in the classroom for only five years before he became an administrator, he listed curriculum and instructional leadership as challenges and areas he wanted to continue exploring and expanding.

Mr. Rainey and this team spent time dealing with instruction, lesson preparation, and also used personalization to challenge all students within the school. Whether by providing opportunities for dual enrollment classes or offering a variety of CTAE classes and to encouraging student agency in classes, he and his team worked hard to provide student choice. Margolis and McCabe (2006) advocated for more student choice for struggling learners, and Wolk (2011) advocated for more personalization and choice for all students.

Teachers also strongly expressed one of Mr. Rainey’s predominate pushes at the school was for increased classroom rigor. Teacher’s held the belief that he both advocated and provided training to help teachers better challenge students. Blackburn (2017) posited rigor played a vital role in increased student achievement. Teacher 1 stated: “He always wanted curriculum to be rigorous . . . he just has always encouraged the teachers to take it to the next level so that you are keeping students engaged.”

Barriers

This theme reflected the barriers Mr. Rainey and teachers perceived he faced as he led Elway High School to gains in student achievement and a top five CCRPI score for all Title I high schools in the state of Georgia. Mr. Rainey faced complex situations as principal, endured stress, and experienced periods when he had limited control of key functions within the school. Through it all, he was ultimately the person held accountable for student outcomes. Teachers perceived that he faced some political setbacks as the principal and expanded on how he managed the organization through times of turmoil. Teachers also stated they believed he faced the barrier of being an outsider in the small South Georgia community and had to work at gaining respect and acceptance.

Principals at different schools can face vastly different barriers, which expands the importance of leaders looking at systems as a whole and strategically thinking through complexities to increase student achievement (Hallinger & McCary, 1990). One of the ways the principal tried to avoid these situations was by thinking through what a decision might look like in the future. He stated: "Something that I guess would be a skill or strength of mine is being able to see the ramifications of doing things." He used foresight, as outlined by Spears (2004), when making decisions for the school, whether the decisions were about adjusting the bell schedule or changing the sequencing of classes students would take. Anticipating questions often gave him leverage, as he always had answers for his constituents when they analyzed his decisions.

Both Mr. Rainey and teachers agreed many of the major barriers he faced in his job were political ones. At times, he was given limitations to his power from the school board when it came to hiring decisions and allocations for positions. Bolman and Deal (2003) outlined a political frame for leaders. Within this frame, leaders are challenged to recognize and work with informal networks in order to solve organizational problems. Mr. Rainey became familiar with this frame and learned to deal with politics. Within this frame, the leader is required to "build coalitions, loyalty, and negotiation skills" (Howard, Logue, Quimby, & Schoeneberg, 2009, p. 25). The relationships Mr. Rainey formed, many using characteristics outlined by Spears (2004) as servant leader characteristics, helped him to both endure and overcome many such barriers he faced as principal.

Final Conclusions

Leading a secondary school to successful gains in student achievement is complex and complicated work (Fullan, 2008b). There are barriers every principal will face, and these barriers will be unique to different districts and school settings. Mr. Rainey has faced his share of barriers as principal. From finding ways to motivate and move his teachers to facing decisions that were contradictory to his beliefs from his school board, he has endured some setbacks. So far, he has found ways to overcome these barriers.

The researcher's strongest conclusion from the study is the importance of the relational element. Leadership studies tend to focus a great deal on the strategy itself. Many studies seek out the program, initiative, or magic formula that will create the needed result. To an extent, this is what was expected from the study. The researcher expected to hear that if a leader does this, chances are these will be the results. It was known, but Mr. Rainey reinforced, there is no one program or formula that can increase student achievement. It takes human spirit to accomplish

these goals in education. It takes relationships, building trust, and working together while holding each other accountable. Programs and initiatives may often come and go, but as Kouzes and Posner (2006) stated, people will always choose whom they follow. It is possible people followed Mr. Rainey because of the attention, genuine care, and general concern he showed them. They invested in him because he invested in them first.

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