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A Case Study On The Influence Of Frequent Superintendent Turnover On The Culture Of A K-12 Suburban School District

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A CASE STUDY ON THE INFLUENCE OF FREQUENT SUPERINTENDENT
TURNOVER ON THE CULTURE OF A K-12 SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

By
Victoria C. Velazquez

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Seton Hall University
Department of Education, Management, Leadership and Policy

Under the Supervision of Dr. Daniel Gutmore
March 2017

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APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

Victoria Velazquez, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ed.D.** during this **Spring Semester 2017**.

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ABSTRACT

The role of school superintendents is varied and complex. Further complicating this role is the issue of frequent superintendent turnover. While there is ample research addressing the links between superintendents and student achievement, superintendents' relationships with school boards and the shortage of qualified superintendents across the country due to high turnover rates, there is little research focusing specifically on superintendent turnover's influence on the culture of a district.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an ethnographic, cross-case case study on the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a northeastern United States suburban K-12 school district. The intent of the study was to support the district profiled and the larger educational community in understanding the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of a district, as culture has been an area overlooked in empirical research.

Although superintendent turnover has been studied in relation to student achievement and relationships with school boards, there is a lack of information on the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of school organizations, which is of interest to researchers, school boards and school district communities.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the person who I feel has been my biggest and best contribution to this world, my brilliant, amazing and gorgeous daughter, Alexandra V. Velazquez. You have been my biggest supporter throughout this process, and I could not have done this without you cheering your momma on all the way.

You are strong, independent, driven, fearless and can accomplish anything you desire. I am more proud of you than anyone on earth. You are the person all women should aspire to be.

Thank you for inspiring and supporting mommy to always continue dreaming, hoping, believing and for helping to allow me to make an impact and have a positive influence on those around us.

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Proverbs 3:5-6:

⁵ *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;*

⁶ *In all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.*

Corinthians 15:57

⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I first wish to acknowledge and give all the glory to God, as it is He who lead me on this path and “kept it straight” on my journey both to the completion of my doctoral degree and in all areas of my life. Without him, none of this would be possible. All my thanks is directed to Him from the core of my being.

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“Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Mahatma Gandhi

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

School superintendents are tasked with leading increasingly complex school organizations. Skills in cultural leadership are essential for successful superintendents. Understanding and recognizing the role culture plays in a district's success is vital to moving school districts forward.

There is ample research that shows the significance of superintendents and their impact on student academic achievement. There is, however, a lack of information that profiles the connections between superintendent turnover and its influence on the culture of the district and the schools they serve. Another approach to improving student achievement is through the establishment of a positive school culture. Recent research findings indicate that school leadership and culture influence academic achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Sahin, 2011; Kythreotis et al., 2010; MacNeil et al., 2010).

Further complicating the impact of culture on school organizations is that many districts suffer from a shortage of experienced administrators and can be plagued by high turnover of superintendents. In research from Grissom (2012), a survey of 215 of California's approximately 1,000 districts found that between 2006 and 2009, 71% of superintendents in California's largest districts and 45% of all superintendents left their districts within three years. A "revolving door" of superintendents was described in districts profiled in other studies (Natkin et al., 2002), which included eight superintendents in five years in St. Louis, MO and 25 superintendents in 40 years in

Kansas City, MO (Taylor, 2008). Reviews by Alsbury (2008) and Peterson (2002) suggest that successfully implemented district office interactions by leaders have a direct impact on positive “learning environments” in schools, which, in turn, can impact student achievement (as cited by Grissom, 2012). According to a survey conducted in the 2013-2014 school year, the average superintendent tenure in urban school districts in the U.S. is 3.2 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014.).

The significance of the school district superintendent and the influence of superintendent turnover create a need for understanding the factors that steer superintendent turnover through further empirical research. At present, superintendent turnover lacks a well-developed research basis (Natkin et al., 2002). Current research has taken the form of qualitative explorations of the reasons for turnover through case reviews and interviews with superintendents. Studies that have empirically tested the relationship between superintendent turnover and its influence on the culture of a district could not be located.

The district profiled, XXXX School District (masked for anonymity), in the northeastern United States has been plagued by high superintendent and administrator turnover in recent years. The school district has had four sitting superintendents in the past six years. The local county in which the district is located had a 70% turnover of superintendents in the five years before the 2015-2016 school year, when five of the eight county districts started the year with new superintendents, citing “stress and public scrutiny” as the cause for high turnover (DiMatta, 2015). The average tenure of superintendents in the district profiled is 3.2 years, mirroring the national average.

In this ethnographic qualitative cross-case analysis case study, the researcher sought to determine if frequent superintendent turnover had an influence on the culture of the district. Although we are aware of the multitude of reasons for superintendent turnover (accountability mandates, school board relationships, high-stress levels, higher pay) and its impact on student, teacher and district outcomes, there is currently little research regarding superintendent turnover and its influence on the culture of a school or district.

Background of the Study

The constantly changing roles of the superintendent position, high rates of superintendent turnover and their impact upon schools are worthy of rigorous research. The position of superintendent is filled with stress, mandates, political pressure, school board involvement and public judgments. Examining the impact of superintendent turnover on a district is an area of study that would be of value to the larger education community.

The average tenure of urban superintendents across the country is 3.2 years (Will, 2014). Superintendent tenure and implementation of leadership practices are positively correlated with student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006). Constant turnover and upheaval create a lack of stability that impedes the success of any organization (Getzels & Guba, 1957). This turnover may mean that... “The position of superintendent may be evolving into a temporary position” (Clark, 2001, p. 40). In an examination of previous literature, a critical goal is to determine if there is a relationship between superintendent turnover and the culture of the district and the schools within the it.

Among a group of superintendents polled, 88% agreed that a shortage of candidates for superintendent is a serious crisis in education in America (Cooper et al., 2000, p. 4). For the present study, “frequent” superintendent turnover will be defined by a superintendent spending five years or less in the position, as research shows that successful school reforms typically take five years or more (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Statement of the Problem

While districts across the country focus school improvement efforts on student achievement and academic achievement goals, school and district culture is often overlooked and should be worthy of the same strategic efforts. Research profiled by Deal and Peterson (2009) suggests that a strong, positive culture assists in increased “productivity, communication and problem solving towards successful change and improvement efforts, and focusing attention on what is important in an organization.

Each school organization has a culture or “unwritten rules” that shape the ways stakeholders in the organization feel, think and behave. Understanding how superintendent turnover can influence a district’s culture can influence the success of the schools in the district. As Fullan (2001) opined, “Reculturing is the name of the game.”

Schools and districts with positive cultures demonstrate meaningful programming, staff development and effective data use. In contrast, a school or district with a negative culture does not value professional learning, resists change, devalues staff development and hinders success. School/district culture can have a positive or negative impact on success in the district as a whole; as a “hidden” obstacle to achievement and

progress, it is not often examined as a contributing factor to district success (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Schools/districts need positive and productive cultures that support the structural changes needed to execute a national focus on intensive accountability, assessment methods and curriculum standards. This is complicated by a frequent turnover of superintendents, resulting in a constant “reshaping” of organizational culture that leaves staff, students, parents and school boards frustrated. Stakeholders must navigate continuous organizational changes that result from frequent turnover and new mandates that arrive with new leadership. Superintendents influence values and norms in their organizations. Therefore, establishing and maintaining positive district cultures is difficult if district superintendents turnover frequently. However, there is a current lack of a well-developed research foundation for understanding superintendent turnover (Natkin et al., 2002).

Does our nation face a crisis of finding committed superintendents to lead schools and districts across the nation? In recent years, the superintendent position appears to be perceived as an impossible job few would like to undertake. The implications of frequent superintendent turnover include a significant impact upon school districts’ student achievement and attainment of comprehensive goals and objectives. The best and brightest who are most dedicated to reform and acting as agents of change find themselves pawns in the political landscape that education is becoming across the nation. This is resulting in high turnover rates, decreased job satisfaction and uncertainty for many superintendents. Superintendent turnover, in turn, is impacting progress, change and the culture of the nation’s school districts. Cooper et al. (2000) found a statistically

significant relationship between higher poverty rates and more frequent superintendent turnover in school districts. A study in Texas (Trevino et al., 2008) found a statistically significant relationship between district finances and short superintendent tenures. Additionally, a statistically significant connection was found between superintendent turnover tied to political motives and declining test scores (Alsbury, 2008).

Evidence suggests that fewer qualified candidates are applying for superintendent positions as stakeholders across the nation tout the need for school reform (Norton, 1996). Norton (1996) states that superintendents are the targets of criticism, centers of controversy, defenders of policy and orchestrators of diverse interests. Crowson (1987) argues, “The superintendency is a position awash in contradictions and anomalies and frankly, a distinct puzzle to those who seek to make a bit of conceptual sense out of this intriguing job.” (p.49-50) According to national studies, the length of time superintendents stay in a district ranges from 2.5 to 6.5 years (Metzger, 1997). The instability of the superintendent position has had a multitude of effects on students, school staff and communities across the country. Grady and Bryant (1991) stated that “frequent superintendent turnover affects the stability of school districts.” (p.3) Many researchers believe the length of tenure for school superintendents is nearing a crisis level (AASA, 1999; Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Moses, 2000).

The school district profiled in the present study has endured a high level of turnover by superintendents and district-level administrators. In the past six years, there have been four superintendents for the district. The average tenure for superintendents in the district is 3.2 years. The turnover rate for superintendents in the district’s county has been 70% over the last five years (DiMatta, 2015). As a researcher, the problem I chose to

focus on is the influence of superintendent and administrator turnover on the district culture. A focus on culture is lacking in research on superintendent turnover. In this study, I address issues related to high superintendent turnover and its impact on the district culture. This addresses the gap in current literature, in which few resources are available to frame researchers' understanding of the problem or its magnitude. It is imperative that schools and districts have the best and most stable leadership possible. A thorough understanding of the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture can assist in ensuring superintendents remain in their position long enough to have a positive impact on those they serve.

Existing literature on the effects of superintendent turnover on culture is limited. Despite limited empirical evidence demonstrating the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture, researchers throughout the literature have stressed the importance of leadership. As quoted in Hoyle et al. (2005), Leithwood and Riehl (2003) stated, "Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of quality of curriculum and teacher's instruction." Waters and Marzano (2006) found that superintendents' tenure, or longevity, was positively correlated with student achievement. If we desire to improve our schools and increase student achievement, efforts must be made to solidify relationships with effective district leadership and subsequently provide the support needed for a superintendent to be successful in addressing the culture of the district, which in turn, affects future district outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to conduct a qualitative ethnographic case study to discover the perceptions of district staff regarding the influence of frequent superintendent

turnover in the school district on the district culture, as evidenced by information gathered in semi-structured interviews with administrators, principals, building-level teachers and support staff. Previous studies have examined the impact of superintendent turnover on school board expectations (Bundy, 2003) and on student achievement outcomes (Marzano & Waters, 2006; Parker-Chenaille, 2012; Shelton, 2010). However, research is lacking on the relationship between superintendent turnover and the culture of a district.

A qualitative ethnographic cross-case analysis case study design was used when conducting semi-structured interviews with study participants to obtain data. Consistent themes were coded and analyzed.

Because there is so little research on the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture, the information gained could enhance existing research to include the cultural implications for districts that face frequent superintendent turnover such as the impact on student academic achievement data and school board relationships. The study could potentially provide additional insight for current superintendents, including those new to the profession, and the larger educational community to better understand the pivotal role superintendents play within a district.

Significance of the Study

Hoyle et al., (2002) (as cited in Byrd et al., 2006) expressed that the success or failure of individual superintendents and their length of tenure is a subject that is ambiguous and not thoroughly researched. According to Cooper, Fusarelli and Carella (2000), the public perception of the superintendency is that of a job so daunting that few individuals desire

to pursue the challenge. Given the challenges of the job, what are the factors that lead to superintendent turnover in the field (Byrd et al., 2006)? The present study is significant because much of the existing literature on administrator turnover relative to culture typically focuses on principals, not superintendents. Research shows high principal turnover can lead to high teacher turnover (Beteille et al., 2011; Fuller et al., 2007), thus having an undesirable impact on student achievement (Fuller et al., 2007).

From this study's findings, districts, school boards and school communities may be better able to retain their superintendents for longer periods to ensure a positive correlation with high levels of satisfaction related to the culture of the district. Culture is an area often overlooked, where many districts instead focus purely on student achievement related to federal, state and local mandates. This study directly examines the importance perceptions of the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a school district due to the visibility of the position. Today's superintendents serve in very visible and public positions and are under scrutiny while facing criticism from the press, the public, school boards and staff.

Change is difficult for organizations and the individuals who comprise them. Continuity and stability in the position of school district superintendent are in the best interest of the district. When there is continuous change in the superintendent position, the school and larger community can suffer negative effects such as financial loss from the search for and hiring of a new superintendent at a salary that is often higher than that of the previous appointee (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Additionally, the district experiences a culture change that arrives with new leadership, which could be either positive or negative.

The superintendent is the lead learner and primary leader of an educational organization/district and therefore impacts every facet of the organization. Leaders who change school districts every few years create instability in the school system, which can result in decreased continuity of learning across grade levels, increased teacher and staff turnover, increased administrative turnover within the district and an inability for the school district to implement long-range school reform initiatives.

Studies have shown that student achievement is directly impacted by instability in the superintendent position. “Studies indicate that the length of superintendent tenure... (McRel, as cited by Plotts, 2011; Waters & Marzano, 2006).”

The culture in classrooms is influenced by the culture of the school, which is influenced by the district’s culture (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017, p. 69). Researchers have thus found that superintendents who can focus the efforts of stakeholders on student achievement improve the academic achievement of students. Waters & Marzano (2006) found that the length of superintendent tenure “affects the academic achievement students in the district positively” (p. 14). Their research found that as early as two years into a superintendent’s tenure these “positive effects appear to manifest themselves” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 14). Awareness of culture in a district and its influences allows the facilitation of future growth, progress and change (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017, p. 71). Understanding the relationship between frequent superintendent turnover and the culture of the district is important for policymakers and school boards due to the detrimental effects that can result from a succession of superintendents over time. With increased accountability mandates, the stakes are high.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the Framework for Understanding Superintendent Turnover (Figure 1.1, p. 12, from Grissom & Anderson, 2010). The reasons for superintendent turnover are many, varied and complex. They extend well beyond relationships with local school boards and communities. Grissom and Anderson (2010) detailed a study of one quarter of the 925 school districts in California and examined the characteristics that could lead to superintendent turnover, including the following:

- District Characteristics
- School Board Characteristics
- Superintendent Characteristics
- Student Performance Characteristics
- School Board's Considerations for Relative Costs and Benefits of Continued Employment
- Superintendent's Considerations of Relative Costs and Benefits of Continued Employment
- School Board's Decision to Terminate
- Superintendent's Decision to Voluntarily Exit
- Ultimately all Factors that Lead to Superintendent Turnover

While these are all valid considerations for superintendent turnover, current research leaves the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of a district wide open, therefore reinforcing the need for further study.

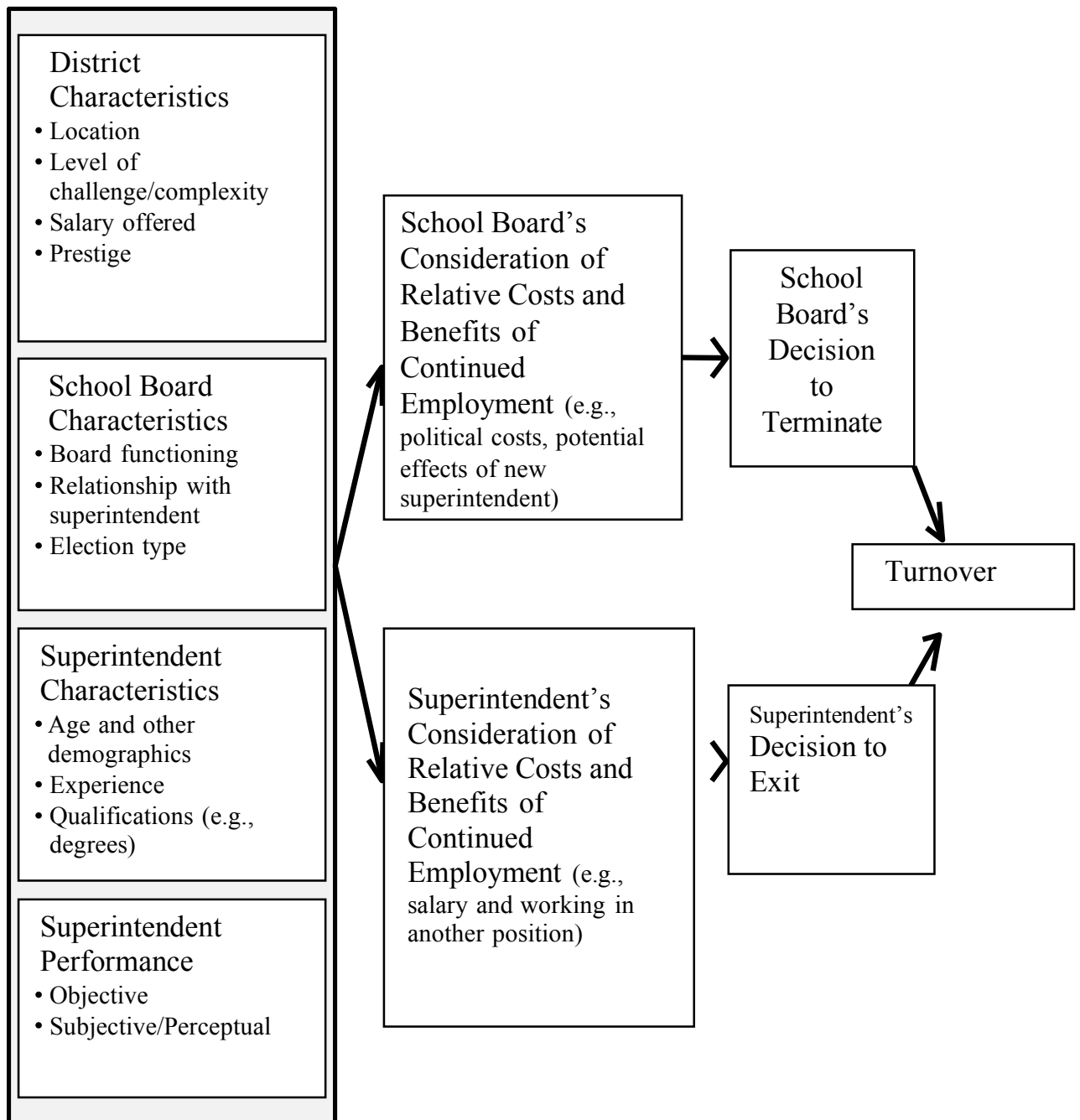


Figure 1.1 A Framework for Understanding Superintendent Turnover (Grissom & Anderson, 2010)

Research Questions

This qualitative ethnographic cross-case analysis case study is guided by the following research questions:

Primary RQ 1. How has the frequent turnover of superintendents influenced the culture of a suburban K-12 district?

Secondary RQ 2. How do administrators and principals describe the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

Secondary RQ 3. How do teachers describe the influence of frequent district superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

Secondary RQ 4. How do the district support staff describe the influence of frequent district superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

Secondary RQ. 5. How do administrators', teachers' and support staff's perceptions and experiences vary? Are they similar or different?

Limitations of the Study

The study faces some limitations that cannot be controlled by the researcher.

- In qualitative research studies, there can be errors in reporting, and this can be considered a limitation. To minimize error, the researcher must maintain thorough and careful field notes and ensure interviews are tape-recorded accurately and properly transcribed at their conclusion.
- In qualitative research, there can be validity concerns regarding the credibility of the results. The researcher must thus use a verification method of triangulating the results and information provided by the participants. Member checking must also be used when reviewing the research questions and reporting the data analysis

results (themes and categories) to verify that the researchers' interpretations are accurate.

- A possible limitation of the study could be only using semi-structured interviews and not multiple data sources in the case analysis.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations of the study or choices made by the researcher include the following:

- Interviews are limited to currently employed district staff.
- Data is only collected during one academic year.
- Only the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture is examined.
- The study focuses on the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture in one district.
- There is a lack of prior research on the topic.

Definition of Terms

In this study, the following terms are specifically defined either by the researcher or in the literature, in which case the sources are cited.

Academic achievement refers to the extent to which a student, teacher or educational organization has achieved their goals.

Case study - A data collection method in which a single person, entity or phenomenon is studied in-depth over a sustained period and through a variety of data (Laurer, 2006, p.108).

Characteristics are the specific factors and variables to be explored.

Climate refers to the “views or perceptions of the school culture held by those who are important to the school environment” (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003; Keefe & Kelley, 1990, as cited from Fetsco et al., n.d).

Culture is generally “defined as the values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and underlying expectations of the school environment” (Higgins-D’Alessandro & Sath, 1998; Keefe & Kelley, 1990; Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006).

Data - Factual information gathered as evidence for a research study.

Data analysis plan - The plan for analyzing data in a research study. In qualitative studies, the data analysis plan provides details on coding procedures.

Descriptive research - A type of research that has the goal of describing what, how or why something is happening.

Disconfirming evidence - A method used to verify the accuracy of the data analyses in qualitative research by searching for evidence that negates the themes and categories the researcher used to code and analyze the data (Laurer, 2006, p. 112).

Empirical information - Information based on something that can be observed (e.g., test scores, observations, interview responses are all examples of empirical information in education research) (Laurer, 2006, p. 113).

Empirical research - Research that seeks systematic information about something that can be observed in the real world.

Interview - A data collection method used by the researcher to ask questions of individuals or groups; the research then records the participants’ responses. In this study, the interviews were conducted face to face.

Longevity in this study refers to the length of a superintendent’s tenure in a school district.

Member checking - A method used to verify the accuracy of the data analysis in qualitative research by asking participants to review the findings and comment on the accuracy of themes and categories the researcher has identified (Laurer, 2006, p. 120).

Mobility is the ability to move from place to place.

Narrative descriptions - Verbal descriptions of the information obtained from qualitative research such as descriptions of the interview results.

Population - All individuals belonging to the group being studied.

Principal - The person who holds a presiding rank or leads an elementary, middle or high school in the United States.

Qualitative research - Research in which the data consists of narrative descriptions or observations.

Reliability - The extent to which a measuring instrument produces consistent results when administered again under similar conditions (Laurer, 2006, p. 128).

School boards are corporate entities that develop their legal authority to organize and operate school districts for the state and hold statutory responsibilities for policy, budget and programs (Blumberg & Blumber, 1985).

School district refers to geographical boundaries that are governed by a Board of Trustees that includes schools in single areas that serve the population of the community.

Superintendent - the chief administrator of a school corporation responsible for the actions of the school corporation.

Tenure in this study is defined as the characteristics that influence a superintendent to remain in a district for a period of time.

Title I in this study refers to Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As amended, it provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Federal funds are currently allocated through four statutory formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (U.S. D.O.E.).

Triangulation - Comparison of results obtained from multiple research methods, participants or data collection strategies.

Turnover is the amount of movement that occurs in and out of an organization due to resignations, discharges, retirements and deaths (Shields, 2002).

Validity - The degree to which the conclusions of a research study are supported by evidence and can be trusted (Laurer, 2006, p. 137).

Chapter Summary/Organization of the Study

The influence of frequent superintendent turnover can directly and specifically impact the culture of a school district. The research study is organized into five chapters.

Chapter I of this study provides an introduction containing specific background information that is related to the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a school district. The chapter develops to describe the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the theoretical framework, research questions, key terms and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapter II of the study consists of a review of the literature related to the inclusion and exclusion relevant research superintendents, their turnover, its impact, their

relationships with school boards, an examination of culture vs. climate and organizational culture.

Chapter III provides a description of the research design, which is a qualitative, ethnographic case study, as well as the methodology and data analysis processes used in the study.

Chapter IV reports the data collected during the study in semi-structured interviews with the study participants.

Chapter V provides analysis and interpretation of the data collected (reported in Chapter IV) and a summary of the research, analysis, findings and recommendations for further study.

Superintendents are under increasing pressure and higher levels of accountability from the national, state and local levels to ensure student academic achievement. Often, the culture of a district is overlooked in an era where districts are hyper-focused on test scores, standardization and student achievement levels. However, it is just as important to create and maintain a culture conducive to ensuring student academic achievement, as a lack of awareness of the importance of district culture can contribute to a revolving door of superintendency if this area is neglected, or overlooked.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter II is to provide a background on the empirical research related to the superintendency, relationships with superintendents, superintendent and principal turnover and its impact.

To provide a foundation for addressing the research questions of the present study, the literature review discusses research detailing superintendent and principal turnover, student achievement, school boards, culture and climate. Lastly, the summary uses the literature to support the research questions that will assist in determining the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the selected district.

The Superintendency

Since the controversy created by the *A Nation at Risk* report, many researchers have focused on the impact of schools and the principal on outcomes, while surprisingly little research has been conducted on the role of the superintendent of schools (Goodlad, 1997). While the role of the principal is important, as are the demands of standardized testing, mandates, and curriculum, this should not diminish the importance of the role of superintendent, or explain the lack of research devoted to the examination of the role of superintendent. Marzano and Waters (2006) found that district leadership added value to an education system. They further expanded their research in 2009 through the book *District Leadership that Works, Striking the Right Balance*, in which they determined that the superintendent role does make a difference and profiled five goals superintendents can work toward.

The thought that the effectiveness of leadership is dependent upon the alignment of the leader's characteristics and "variables such as task structure, positional power and subordinates' skills and attitudes" may be helpful for matching a specific leadership style to a particular situation (Hoy & Miskel, 2012 p. 235). However, it does not account for the intricacies of school leaders' work environments or the culture of the organizations they oversee. Glass et al. (2000) states, "The superintendency is so very different from district to district that making generalizations is hazardous. In fact, there is no such thing as the superintendency; instead, there are many superintendencies. Often they are more unlike than like each other" (p. 15). "If a superintendent is not a steward of the system's culture, then the culture will ultimately manage the superintendent" (Schein, 2013). Studies have shown a significant correlation between administrative leadership and positive teacher working conditions (Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Literature focuses on coaching and developing teachers, discipline and minimizing duties, which are school-level practices and the duties of the school principal. However, there is growing recognition of the important role that district leaders play, particularly at the superintendent's level. Issues such as the hiring of principals, mission/vision-building, policy development and salary decisions (e.g., negotiations with unions, etc.) play a prominent role in teachers' perceptions of their working conditions and are intricately linked to the superintendent's leadership. Jordan (2012) found that the average tenure for a superintendent is between 2.5 and 6.5 years (Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2002). The lack of consistency at the superintendent level could have negative impacts within a school district. Districts

whose superintendents have short tenures are typically unable to thrive because of their inability to maintain stability (Pascopella, 2011).

In the *American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*, a report published in December 2010, researchers looked at the state of school leadership in the United States. It provided a snapshot of the superintendents leading the nation's schools and the districts they are placed in. The roles of America's superintendents are incredibly diverse, covering not just student achievement but also managing diverse populations, entailing 21st-century skills. A strong emphasis is placed on technology, government mandates, school board and community oversight and issues of globalization. The report's findings include the following:

- Since 1992, the percentage of female superintendents has increased to 24.1% (from 13.2% in 2000).
- Non-minority responders more often assumed the superintendent position before the age of 46 than did responders in the minority category.
- Minorities were more than twice as likely than non-minorities to report that they had encountered discrimination in the superintendent position.
- Superintendents rated the level of job satisfaction as "high."

Fifty-one percent said that they planned to still be superintendents in 2015, thus suggesting that in the next several years there is a high probability that there could be a continuation in the trend of superintendent turnover if half are leaving the position.

Purpose of the Review

In reviewing the literature on superintendent tenure/turnover and school culture, research-based articles relating to these topics were examined. Although there is literature

related to superintendent turnover, it is limited with regard to the influence of this turnover on the culture of school districts.

The purpose of the review is to identify empirical studies that examine (a) the influence of turnover of superintendents and (b) the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of school districts.

Literature Search Procedures

The literature reviewed was accessed through several on-line databases including ERIC, Pro Quest, Dissertation Abstracts, Online Search Services, Seton Hall University Library Research Services, and XXXX School District (Name deleted for anonymity) data sources.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Literature Review

Studies that met the following criteria were included in the review: (a) peer-reviewed journals and dissertations; (b) studies that included the following: descriptive, non-experimental, multiple regression, meta-analysis and quantitative research; (c) books, articles and theoretical texts.

Superintendent Turnover

Research regarding superintendent turnover examines the stress levels and factors that explain why superintendents separate from their districts and details how their departures can hinder district reform and improvement. In one study beginning in 2006, Grisson and Anderson (2012) examined 215 superintendents and determined that 45% left within three years. The authors determined that school boards rating superintendents highly and hiring them as internal candidates helped predict non-retirement departures three years later. Researchers have found that when there are superintendent issues within

local school boards superintendents often consider higher paying positions in larger districts. Early research by Grisson and Anderson (2012) found superintendent turnover was grounded in dissatisfaction theory. This theory refers to districts that “experience long stable periods of school board membership while community dissatisfaction with district performance gradually builds, at which time school board members are removed from their seats and successors then replace the superintendent” (Hosman, 1990; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Weninger & Stout, 1989, as quoted in Grisson & Anderson, 2012, p.5).

In a historical analysis of superintendent turnover and tenure in three urban districts, Yee and Cuban (in Clark, 2001) reported the average tenure of superintendents in districts larger than 25,000 students to be 5.8 years. Fullan (1992, as stated in Yee & Cuban, 1996, p. 210) opines that five years is necessary to produce lasting change. Natkin, Cooper, Padilla and Ghosh (2002) reviewed the longevity of 292 superintendents, finding a 6- to 7-year average turnover regardless of the size and location of the districts. The Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) 2003 report showed the average tenure for urban superintendents was 2.75 years, representing a reported increase of .25 years. The Council of Urban Board of Educators (CUBE) found the average superintendent tenure to be 4-5 years (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). In a sample of 2,266 superintendents, researchers found the average tenure to be five to six years (Byrd et. al., 2006). Kowalski (2003) and Natkin et al. (2002) found that rural areas had shorter superintendent tenures than urban or suburban districts. The findings were confirmed in a study regarding superintendent turnover in the Midwest between 1996 and 2006 involving 89 participants (Kamrath et al., 2010). The mean tenure of superintendents in 2007 as reported in a study

by Voygt (2007) was 5.5 years; the median was 6 years. This report highlighted a positive correlation between the longevity of superintendents and student achievement. This effect has been shown as early as two years into a superintendent's tenure.

In Figure 2.1 the graphic shows the percentage of CGCS superintendents by tenure in 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2014, as profiled in the Council of Great City Schools Fall 2014 Urban Indicator Report.

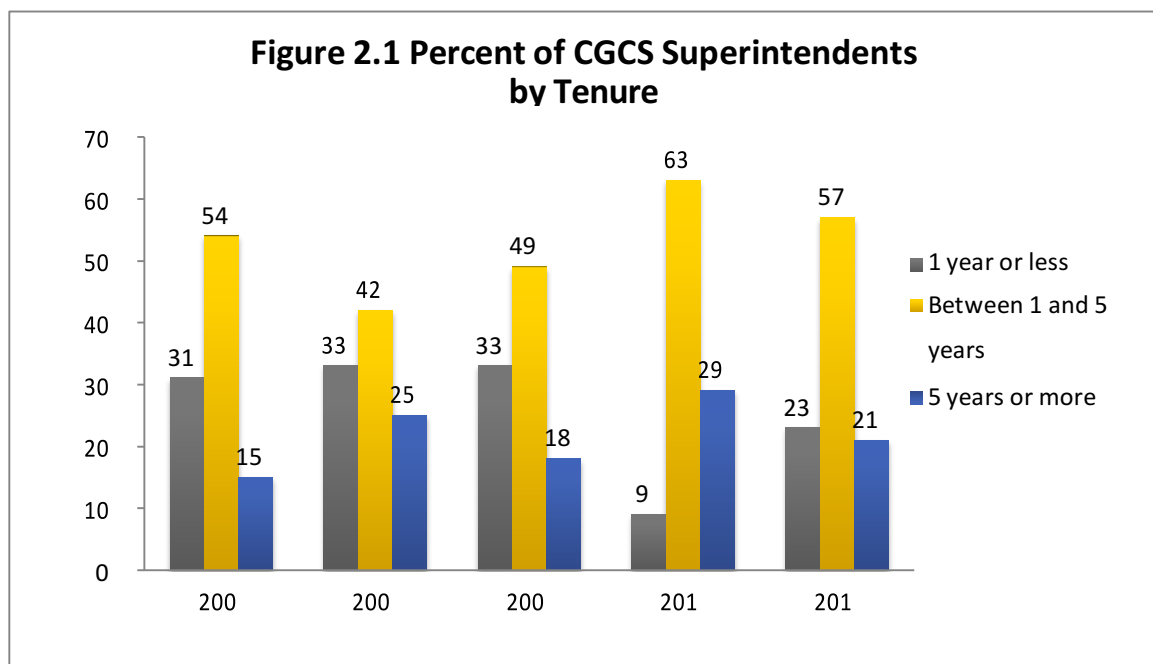


Figure 2.1 Percent of Superintendents by Tenure (Council of Great City Schools, 2014)

According to the New Jersey School Board Association (NJSBA, 2016), 170 of 589 (29%) of New Jersey districts hired new superintendents in 2010-2011. NJSBA reported this as the highest turnover in the 10-year period that NJSBA analyzed superintendent positions (NJSBA, 2016).

Of the 170 superintendent changes in New Jersey's districts, retirements accounted for 51% that year. Twenty-one percent resulted from superintendents moving

to other districts, and in 16% of cases, replacement of an interim superintendent accounted for the turnover. Other factors included death, resignations, and districts where school boards agreed to share superintendents with other districts (NJSBA).

In 2010, the 29% superintendent turnover rate grew from the prior year when 18% of New Jersey school districts changed superintendents. The lowest turnover rate in the past ten years was in 2006-2007 when only eight percent of the Garden State's school districts changed superintendents (NJ School Board Notes).. The NJSBA has followed the superintendent turnover rate since 2001-2002. During that school year, more than "one in five New Jersey school districts changed superintendents" (CBN News, 2011). This trend is not isolated to New Jersey; districts across the nation face roadblocks in hiring experienced superintendents. In fact, in 2011 *Education Week* magazine described the high turnover rate among school superintendents as the nation's "most recent educational crisis."

As profiled in the article "Superintendent Turnover Rate Spikes" (2011), appearing in the *Gloucester City News*, a five-year review of New Jersey districts showed that superintendent changes were as follows:

2010-2011	– 28.9%
2009-2010	– 18.2%
2008-2009	– 20.5%
2007-2008	– 16.8%
2006-2007	– 8.20%

The Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators reviewed 499 Pennsylvania school districts. Sixty percent have experienced "superintendent turnover" during the past six years. A survey of 62 school districts surrounding Philadelphia, including four suburban counties, shows that half of the superintendents have held their

post for three years or less. In Bucks County, for example, 11 of 13 school superintendents have been in their jobs for fewer than five years (Tatu, 2015). “In Gloucester, Burlington, and Camden Counties in New Jersey, at least 25% of the 103 school districts have changed chiefs in three years (Spikes, 2011).”

Despite their different styles of leadership, school superintendents share a mutual trait: despite robust compensation and employment offers, superintendents do not stay in districts for long. Despite high regional salaries, the superintendents show a high turnover rate. “In the 2014-15 school year, superintendents in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties in Pennsylvania on average were making \$187,000 annually, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* analysis found, in a league with the salaries of PA & NJ Governors Wolf and Christie. Yet, in Lower Bucks County alone, five of eight districts have new superintendents this school year, 2015-2016 (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2015).”

In a Brookings Institution study, it was found that nationally typical superintendent tenure is three to four years. Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, Jim Buckheit, said “300, or 60 percent, of the state’s districts have seen change at the top in the last five years (Tatu, 2015).” There could be several reasons for this, including standardized testing mandates, fiscal issues and an increased focus on governmental monitoring of many aspects of the district.

The continuous turnover results in costly searches and leads some to questioning the purpose for and determination of whether a superintendent can make a difference in how well students learn (Bocella, 2015).

Impact of Principal Turnover

There is more research on the influence of principal turnover than that of superintendent turnover (Miller, 2009). Student achievement typically slows down when a new principal is appointed, and usually, the impact is greater in what would be considered the most challenging schools. Newly appointed principals may have less experience, which could result in slower gains.

Just as with superintendents, principals may initially be appointed in challenging schools then later transfer to other less challenging schools as vacancies become available. A study in a large city district found that a principal's second or third school enrolled almost 90% fewer poor and minority students than their first appointed position. (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Miller, 2009.) One could infer that this is likewise a contributing factor to frequent superintendent turnover.

Research has shown that high levels of principal turnover can lead to higher level of teacher turnover, further affecting district culture (Beetele et al., 2011; Fuller et al., 2007) Consistent, or high levels of, principal turnover can lead to teachers not investing in efforts to incorporate management-led change, "waiting [principals] out" (Hargreaves et al., 2003, p.8.) and negatively impacting school improvement efforts (Fullan, 1991). McAdams's (1997) research suggests that principals must be in place for five years to have an influence on change efforts, improvements, retention of staff and increased capacity-building of the school. These factors are imperative when examining the influence of turnover on district culture.

Using data from 1989-2010, Young, Baker and Orr (2011), as cited in Fuller (2012), found that one-half of newly appointed middle school principals remained for

three years, while 30% of principals at the high school level remained for three years. Less than half of recently hired middle school principals remained for longer than five years, and only 27% of high school principals remained that long.

In some cases, principal career changes are driven by district leadership choices or by principals wanting to work with higher achieving students and those from more advantaged socioeconomic circumstances. Principals often use schools with lower-achieving achievement data as “stepping stones” in their career movement.

The district profiled in this study has also been plagued by high levels of administrative turnover in recent years, with five of the nine principal positions being replaced in the past two years, suggesting that high superintendent turnover can also result in high levels of principal turnover, further influencing district culture. “The loss of a superintendent may also negatively affect staff morale and satisfaction” (Alsbury, 2008), which could have “trickle-down” effects on principal and teacher turnover and performance (as cited in Grissom, 2012 ,p.3). This, in turn, can directly influence the culture of the school district.

Superintendent and School Board Relationships

Studies have found that some superintendents leave districts due to school board issues. The relationship between superintendents and school boards can be an influential factor in the longevity of a superintendent in a district. A previous study on the relationship between superintendents and school boards, however, has not characterized this in the most positive light (Mountford, 2004). Mountford (2004) reported, “School board members who practice power in a dominating or oppressive manner can overtly and covertly exert influence over school activities in ways that make the decision-making

process and relationships between board members and superintendents difficult at best” (p. 704). Often, when superintendents have been involuntarily removed from their position, their removal has been due to poor relations with the school board (Metzger, 1997).

Grissom and Anderson (2010) detailed early work specifically focused on superintendent turnover that was grounded in dissatisfaction theory. This theory suggests that when school boards are unstable and there is “dissatisfaction” with the district, the community eventually votes out the school board, and the new board members replace the superintendent, which establishes new management (Hosman, 1990; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Weninger & Stout, 1989, as quoted in Grissom & Anderson, 2012, p.7). The relationship between the superintendent and the school board influences the likelihood of turnover. Often, when superintendents have been removed from the office involuntarily, their removal has been due to poor relations with the school board (Metzger, 1997). Johnson (2010) found that for local school governance to survive, superintendent and board relations must improve.

However, the 2010 State of the Superintendency Survey (Kowalski et al., 2010) found that 72% of superintendents evaluated their boards as “excellent” or “above average,” indicating that there are frequent /common instances of positive relationships between superintendents and school boards. In the National School Boards Association’s study of more than 700 school districts, it was reported the relationship between superintendents and their board members was the most important factor in evaluating their 20 superintendents (Land, 2002). Kowalski et al. (2010) examined the effect of board conflict and found that 15% of superintendents in the nation leave their positions

because of conflicts with the board.

Research shows that superintendents need to implement strategies for building and maintaining effective working relationships with the local school board. School boards should “focus on their governing role and treating the superintendent as a partner and educational expert” (Fullan et al., 2005). Fullan et al. (2005) described successful organizations as those that value differences and may not always be congenial or consensual. “Working in a [collaborative], high trust yet demanding culture, participants take disagreements as normal when undergoing changes, and can value and work through differences” (Fullan, 2005 p. 72). Danzberger (1998) suggested that strategies should be in place at the beginning of the board-superintendent relationship to encourage a positive environment. “An effective school board-superintendent relationship is much more likely if the expectations are clear and cultivated through the term of the relationship” (Danzberger, 1998, p. 213).

A lack of understanding of the separation of powers between the superintendent and the school board has proven to be a major hindrance to the superintendent-school board relationship (Danzberger, 1998; Mountford, 2004).

The 1985 Institute for Educational Leadership study, *The Superintendent of the Future*, stated that there has been little consideration of the role of the school board in comparison to that of the superintendent. In some cases, this is “perpetuated by superintendent training, which emphasizes a limited definition for board and executive leader roles...Superintendents administer school systems and boards only make policy” (p. 208). The survey also showed that public perception of the school board as a powerful individual entity rather than a group is often misunderstood. The public also has not

understood the nature of the relationship that must be developed and exist between the board and the superintendent (Hill & Celio, 1998).

Rice (2010) noted that a challenge to “necessary board/superintendent collaboration is that some board members do not understand their roles and duties, leading to role confusion, an increased number of board members with personal agendas” (p. i).

It is important to note that the relationship between the superintendent and the school board is different in each district, bringing different outlooks as to the separation of powers between them, as concluded by Rockwood (2010), who opined that as each board of education is different, so are their expectations for the superintendent. “There is no one set of expectations...that are most important for superintendent success in each and every setting” (Rockwood, 2010, p. 144).

Superintendency and Student Achievement

Alsbury (2008) suggested that superintendent leadership was not a relevant issue when looking at student achievement. While some researchers have documented the detrimental effects of superintendent and school board turnover on the progress of schools, studies have also shown that superintendents enact measurable change in districts, and although indirect, their influence on instructional effectiveness can be significant. In a study involving 2,817 districts and achievement data for 3.4 million students, Waters and Marzano (2006) found a “.24 correlation between district leadership and student achievement.” They reported findings from prior studies that “reported a .19 positive correlation between superintendent tenure and student achievement (Waters and Marzano, 2006. p. 3.)” They identified the primary roles of the superintendent as

establishing goals and monitoring performance. Based on Waters and Marzano's study, although indirect, they were significant findings indicating the longer the superintendent serves, there is a resulting positive influence on student achievement.

The links between district leadership positions and student achievement are clear. There is an expectation of accountability that extends to those supervising school operations and academic achievement. The increased number of superintendent positions has not resulted in an increased pool of candidates. Urban districts across the country have seen the same candidates for many vacancies. High expectations, short (3-5 year) contracts, and difficult litigation have increased the pressure of occupying these positions (Nussbaum, 2007).

Often, the incoming superintendent replaces the increased number of superintendent positions and sets a new vision for the district. Staff members and community constituents can easily become frustrated with the constant cycle of change in a district's direction and mission.

Superintendents with an expectation of short tenure have a tendency to focus on short-term goals and crisis management rather than long-term sustained progress and goals. Many are discouraged by the fact that they may not be in the position long enough to see new policies and initiatives through to full implementation and positive results (Anderson, 2006). In 2001, Byrd found no correlation between student achievement and leadership style. However, this study did reveal that there is "a significant relationship" between 1) the management role of the superintendent and student achievement, with those most effective at communicating with and allowing school-level leaders autonomy having the greatest impact; 2) the school board and length of tenure (and the ability to

avoid micromanagement from the board); and 3) level of education and superintendent placement (with doctoral degree holders having an edge) (as cited in Greer, 2011, p. 1).

Superintendent Candidates

In April 2008, a survey by the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) Center for System Leadership (AASA, 2008) found that almost 78% of the 2,110 respondents indicated that they were over the age of 50. Almost 81% had 10 years or less experience as a superintendent, leading to the conclusion that superintendent candidates are not highly experienced and are becoming older.

The advancing age of superintendents is consistent with increased hiring of retired educators or leaders retired from the private sector (Kiser, 2010). This has implications, as many superintendents retire before the three to eight years needed to put in place structures for sustainable change and improvement in a district (Kiser, 2010). Kiser's (2010) identified trends (2010) have been verified by other researchers. In 2004, 30% of superintendents in Ohio were retirees (Kranz, 2004). The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (2008) reported that almost half of the superintendents in Texas would retire within 10 years, and in the preceding five years over 55% left the profession (Greer, 2011).

Understanding the intricate and complex roles and responsibilities of school superintendents is a difficult task given the requirements, complexity and expectations of the role. The challenges of the superintendency were reviewed by Houston (2001), who wrote, "Superintendents know they can change the trajectory of children's lives, alter the behavior of organizations, and expand the possibilities of whole communities (Houston, 2011, p.429)." As Houston suggests, despite the constraints of law, policy

and mandates, the superintendent role is one in which an individual hopes to make an impact on the district community. A superintendent must maintain a high level of awareness of stakeholder perceptions and reconcile them with reality.

Fullan (2003) relates this position of school law and state policy as follows: “What standards were to the 1990s, leadership is to the future (p.1)”. While standards and accountability are highly valued, it is my elief that organizational success rests on the shoulders of the leader to accomplish viable change within an organization. How a superintendent chooses to define the roles and responsibilities can make all the difference in his/her longevity on the role and subsequent positive outcomes a superintendent will realize.

Houston (2001) states, “Leadership in the future will be about the creation and maintenance of relationships: the relationships of children to learning, children to children, children to adults, adults to adults, and school to the community (Voyt, 2007 p.1).”

Impact of Superintendent Turnover

The impact of superintendent turnover in a district can have far-reaching effects on the school district “Each superintendent turnover affects student achievement because every superintendent has different priorities or motives” (Boyne & Dahya, 2002, p. 192): Parker-Chenaille, 2012, p.84). Findings by Hill (2005) indicate that in the short term, superintendent turnover has a negative effect on student achievement.

In contrast, in analyzing the work of Meier, O’Toole and Hill, Juenke (2005) asserts that the longer a superintendent works in a district, the greater the superintendent’s ability to increase student achievement.

In a study on rural superintendents, Parker-Chenaille (2012) established that the average tenure was 4.02 years. Superintendents whose tenure that was less than three years in a rural district made “little to no impact on student achievement” (Parker-Chenaille, 2012). Grissom and Anderson (2012) sought to identify factors relating to superintendent turnover in California and determined that superintendents move away from rural districts towards larger, better-paying districts in both urban and suburban areas. However, Alsbury (2008) suggested that in smaller schools (with enrollments less than 500) superintendent turnover does not have an effect on student achievement.

One reason that district performance could be negatively impacted by frequent superintendent turnover is that systemic reform could take five years or more, and the negative impacts of high turnover could last even longer (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). With frequent superintendent turnover, districts could also be faced with high levels of teacher turnover and sub-par performance. This, in turn, ultimately affects teacher and staff job satisfaction and staff morale and ultimately impacts the culture of an a school district and the schools that comprise it (Alsbury, 2008). However, existing literature offers little theoretical basis for the cultural impacts of superintendent turnover (Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

Culture

The educational community often has a difficult time providing a clear and consistent definition of school “culture.” The term has been used along with descriptors such as “climate,” “ethos,” and “saga” (Deal, 1993, p. 6).

Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson (1990) found that the definition of culture includes “deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the

course of [a school's] history.” Paul E. Heckman (1993) found that school culture refers to “the commonly held beliefs of teachers, students, and principals. (p.3)”

Culture was defined by Hoy & Miskel (2001) as “the shared orientations that hold the unit together and give it a distinctive identity” (p. 129).

Culture can be defined as the historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions and myths understood, maybe to varying degrees, by members of the school community (Stolp & Smith, 1994). This system of meaning often shapes what people think and how they act.

A positive district culture improves the morale and overall motivation of the teaching staff in the school district. Therefore, school leaders must harness school culture to target student achievement and teacher effectiveness (Hallinger, 2011; MacNeil et al., 2009). The values and belief systems of various groups show a definite relationship with climate and student outcomes.

Creating a positive school culture is a critical role of the superintendent/school leader. “The leader plays a crucial role in the development of a healthy culture” (Lindahl, 2011, Quinn et.al. p.55). All aspects of the educational environment, especially student outcomes and achievement, are impacted by culture (Kythreotis, Pashiardis, & Kyriakides, 2010; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Sahin, 2011), as referenced in Quinn et.al. (2015, p.56).

The Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA) recognized the need for the superintendent to understand the impact of culture upon school organizations and thus in 2014 added learning modules in Cultural Leadership as resources for administrators. KASA created and provided professional development through *Creating*

the Conditions for Success & Superintendent Effectiveness as part of the *Next Generation New Superintendents Leadership Series (NxGNSLS)*. The modules, taught by sitting superintendents, address superintendent effectiveness by providing an opportunity for superintendents to focus on the development of a school culture that will improve student achievement and establish an environment for continuous improvement. As written in the KASA curriculum, “At no time has school culture and climate been more important than right NOW as each of us works to implement higher standards and a more rigorous and challenging accountability system in Kentucky” (KASA, 2014, p.1). In explaining the need for superintendents to not overlook organizational culture, Kentucky superintendents Dot Perkins and Jim Flynn discussed best practices that enhance school culture and stated the following:

Superintendents understand and act on the important role a system’s culture has in the exemplary performance of all schools. They understand the people in the district and community, how they came to their current state, and how to connect with their traditions in order to move them forward to support the district’s efforts to achieve individual and collective goals. While supporting and valuing the history, traditions, and norms of the district and community, a superintendent must be able to “re-culture” the district, if needed, to align with the district’s goals of improving student and adult learning and to infuse the work of the adults and students with passion, meaning, and purpose. (KASA, 2014)

Influence of Culture

Culture should not be a neglected element in the age of school reform, especially due to its impact upon student achievement. It is important to understand the possible

influence of culture on school performance and the influence that frequent superintendent movement can have upon the organizational culture of a school/district. Often, research focuses on the impact of standardized assessments and achievement; however, it also supports aspects of culture that can act as indicators or predictors of student performance, respect for authority and school satisfaction (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sadh, 1998). The creation of a positive culture at the district level creates “optimal conditions” that assist in creating school cultures conducive to learning (Lunenburg, 2011).

Rutter et al. (1979) found that the particular type of administrative organization structure has no significant effect on any of four outcome measures (achievement, attendance, behavior, delinquency). However, Anglin (1979) reported that organizational structure does influence teacher performance, and thus, indirectly impacts student performance (Anderson, 1982).

While many leaders see culture as a potential “challenge” to overcome, it can also be a tool, or force, to improve schools and influence focused reform efforts (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017, p. 3). Gruenert & Whitaker (2017) proceed to assert that there is a “delicate balance” to the culture-people dynamic and when recognizing the push and pull forces between them organizations can use each to assist in the growth of the other and successfully move an organization forward. However, leaders must recognize that any attempt to tackle or change a culture could be perceived as “messing with the professional religion” of the people in the organization (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2017, p. 13).

Culture vs. Climate

While this study focuses on the influence of superintendent turnover on district

culture, I feel it necessary to address the differences between culture and climate, terms that are often used interchangeably when describing schools but are actually distinct concepts. In this study, I chose to focus on culture and not climate because climate does not appear to be an issue within the school district. In contrast, the culture of the district seems to have suffered due to high levels of superintendent turnover and frequently changing administrators, which is why culture was chosen as an exploratory factor.

Culture and climate are two concepts that impact how well educational organizations, schools and districts function. The climate of an organization reflects how stakeholders, including staff and students, feel about being at school every day. Organizational culture is a concept in education that can be harder to assess as it often is defined by practices and beliefs that can be “hidden,” or so embedded in an organization that they are taken for granted. I chose to focus on the experiences of the district’s stakeholders to more deeply understand the true feel of the organization based on the experiences of those who have been employed during the tenures of past superintendents.

Understanding the impact both concepts have upon the district is crucial to a superintendent’s longevity and potential impact on a district. Leadership is essential for forging positive climates and achievement-focused cultures. District leaders and superintendents should have visions for their schools and districts that are communicated both verbally and through action. High levels of turnover of superintendents can influence both the culture and climate of the organization. “Although climate and culture are distinct concepts, both can impact morale, defined by Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) as “the degree of happiness is reflective of a school’s culture (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).”

Leaders of school organizations relay value of the organization by recognizing rituals that are part of school/district life. The continuous replacement of the district superintendent interrupts the process of district rituals and can have an impact on the culture and climate of the organization.

Climate and culture are separate but interrelated concepts that contribute to the success or failure of an organization. It is imperative not to ignore an organization's culture or climate and to understand how they impact the organization in subconscious or subtle ways. The dynamics found within the culture and climate of an organization can have a major impact on what the organization hopes to achieve.

Odell-Gonder (1994, p. 13) asserts:

[Climate is a term that refers to the atmosphere in a school. It consists of the attitudes shared by members of subgroups, such as students, faculty, and staff, and by the school population as a whole. Climate is generally considered to be positive or negative, although some aspects of a school climate can be positive while others are negative. Climate characteristics affect the outlook, outcomes and job satisfaction of staff in an organization. A positive district climate results from members feeling they are valued as individuals and that they are contributing to the success of the organization. Climate is a term that refers to current staff and their attitudes and feelings, reflective of how stakeholders (parents, community, staff, families, etc.) feel about the district and whether it is a positive place to work and learn or one that is full of problems.]

Culture refers to a deeper, longer-term phenomenon that underlies the values held by the stakeholders who work and learn in the district and the notions they apply to both

typical situations and potentially challenging atypical ones. The culture of an organization develops over time. It is hard to perceive and describe, but it exerts a powerful influence over the way an organization operates, as does the superintendent.

In the 1950s, school effectiveness research focused on climate to gain insight into organizational research (Argyris, 1958). In the 1970s, school climate research was used to gain insight into school processes (Reynolds & Teddie, 2000). In the 1980s, school culture, as opposed to climate seemed to become a larger research focus (Maxwell & Thomas, 1991). Eventually, these terms began to be used interchangeably (Hoy, 1990; Denison, 1996; Glisson, 2000).

During the 1990s the concepts of culture and climate started to appear together, and the similarities and differences were beginning to be examined (Hoy, 1990; Rentsch, 1990; Denison, 1996; Glisson, 2000). There was no consensus as to whether climate encompassed culture or vice versa (Glisson, 2000; Van Houtte, 2005; Schoen & Teddie, 2008). The terms climate and culture are frequently used interchangeably in education, but some argue that differences exist (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Clifford defines climate as the quality and characteristics of school life, which includes the availability of supports for teaching and learning. These include goals, values, interpersonal relationships, organizational structures and internal practices (Clifford et al., 2012). In contrast, Clifford defines culture as “shared beliefs, customs and behaviors (p.3).” Culture represents experiences with ceremonies, beliefs, attitudes, history, ideology, language, practices, rituals, traditions and values (Clifford et al., 2012). While both terms have different meanings, and there is no clear set of variables assigned to either term (Clifford, et al.,

2012). The connection between climate and culture should not be overlooked; however, in this ethnographic case study, the influence of turnover on culture is the focus.

Hoy et al. (1991, p. 51) indicate that school climate captures the essence of an organization's personality. They define school climate as follows: "School climate is the relatively enduring quality of the school environment that is experienced by participants, affects their behaviors, and is based on their collective perceptions of behaviors in schools" (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Hoy & Miskel, 1987; Tagiuri, 1968).

Research on district culture and the capacity to improve it has concentrated on larger urban districts. Less empirical research exists for other public school districts (McLaughlin, 2002; McAdams, 2002).

Culture and Climate: Fulfilling Basic Needs

Abraham Maslow recognized a hierarchy of needs that should be satisfied before individuals reach their goals. The needs are in a priority sequence. Maslow's theory is that once the most basic needs are satisfied, people are driven by the next highest need. In educational organizations, a positive culture and climate serves the top three human needs on a regular basis, while safe, clean, and orderly schools would fulfill the first two needs (McLaughlin, 2002; McAdams, 2002).



Figure 2.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1999)

The theory states “that people perform at their best when their basic psychological and physical needs are met” and are thus contributing to a positive culture. Gruenert and Whitaker (2017, p. 23) argue that creating a “safe place” where basic needs are met is distinct from a “physical space, such as a staff workroom, or parking space;” instead this “safe space” is defined by the efficacy and permission to experiment, rather than “marking territory.”

Organizational Change and Culture

The organizational structures for superintendents have changed in response to political and societal changes, legal decisions, mandates and federal and state legislation. (Kowalski, 2006).

Organizational culture is a system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that govern how people behave in organizations (Rick, 2015). The culture of an organization provides processes and protocols that help members of the organization know the correct

way to perform their jobs. Organizational culture also refers to what may be “unseen” factors that can influence the behaviors and attitudes of the organization’s stakeholders.

Superintendents may have to adjust their leadership when trying to achieve the district vision, which can at times, influence employees job satisfaction, making it a key factor that the superintendent understand the relationship(s) between leadership behavior, employee satisfaction and the organizational culture that exists (Schein, 2013; Tsai, 2011).

Climate and culture do not necessarily work in tandem during a change process (Deal, 1999). “A negative climate/culture does not equal a failed leadership attempt,” Terrence Deal of Vanderbilt University noted. “When I was a junior high teacher at a school in California, the climate really stunk, but it was the beginning of a cultural shift. Any time you introduce change, the climate is going to go to hell.”

The culture of an organization is imprinted in the behavior of its members and is very difficult to change. For this reason, culture can be understood as the “personality” of the organization. The unique culture of an organization creates a distinct atmosphere that is felt by the people who are part of it, and this atmosphere is known as the climate of the organization.

The climate of a school district is subject to frequent conversion and can be shaped by the upper management of an organization. If culture represents the personality of the organization, climate is the organization’s mood. Organizational climate is much easier to experience and measure than organizational culture and also much easier to change. Exploring the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the impact of frequent turnover of superintendents and district administration on culture of the district is

difficult. It is an assumption that the success or failure of these stakeholder relationships will impact a superintendent's success. (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, p. 3).

In extensive research, Bolman and Deal (2008) identified four frames from which organizations can operate to meet established goals and objectives. The Human Resource Frame specifies that organizations operate to serve human needs and that people and organizations need each other. Based on this frame, organizations demonstrate a propensity to understand and respond to the needs of employees and customers. This frame can be tied to theories and concepts put forth by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, emotional intelligence, Jensen's divergent learning, management style theories, McGregor's Theory X and Y, group process theories, interpersonal relationship and dynamics theories, Myers-Briggs, etc. The Structural Frame establishes that organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives by increasing efficiency and enhancing performance through specialization and division of labor. It promotes rationality over personal agendas and pressures. The Symbolic Frame is foundational for faith, meaning and belief. The organization is driven by symbolism from both sides – it can encourage creativity and transform meaning, or it can solidify the status quo and cause stagnation. The Symbolic Frame considers the organization as theater – judged on appearances more than results. The Political Frame views organizations as coalitions of individuals and groups whose members have enduring differences in beliefs, outlooks, values, information, interests, and perceptions of the actors. The most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources. Scarce resources and enduring differences create ongoing conflict. Power is the most important asset. Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining and negotiation by stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Current research findings suggest that relationships in school organizations begin with the superintendent and have a top-down effect. Connections and relationships with school principals are vital to the superintendent's success (Waters and Marzano, 2006).

When the superintendent establishes a relationship with the administrators in all schools, leadership autonomy is often encouraged among principals. As the superintendent encourages the administrators to assume a more proactive leadership responsibility, he is also encouraging the principal to embrace the established goals of the board and superintendent in the process; effective learning environments are improved for students. (Waters and Marzano, 2006)

Siccone (2011) discusses the belief that a superintendent should excel in leadership skills with additional stakeholders and stated it "...necessary for him to work successfully with staff, in order to assist in developing the effective learning environment needed for students to be successful (p.9)." Chynoweth (2008) refers to this need for the superintendent to "win people over when they want to do what needs to be done... It is all about consistency and developing relationships with stakeholders" (as referenced in Williams & Hatch, 2012 p.37).

School Superintendent as a Leader

Superintendents of the 21st century will need to create networks with district stakeholders so that everyone participates in a shared vision (Houston, 2009). Learning is continuous, and it is the responsibility of the superintendent to create networks within all stakeholder groups to create a system of lifelong learning. The superintendent becomes the figurehead that is seen as the leader of the system.

With an emphasis on academic rigor, facilities management and maintaining stakeholder relationships, the job of the superintendent at times seems impossible. Typically, a superintendent's success is measured by some type of accountability measure. Goens (2009) described a successful superintendent as one who possesses "soft qualities" and that these soft qualities are at the

core and heart of a person's ability to bring a group of people together around a common objective. The foundation of leadership rests on character and interactions. It is these fundamental relationships, although, hard to measure, that seem to be at the core of producing tangible and measurable results that impact a superintendent's success. The value of a superintendent continues to be based on relationships (p.10).

A coherent vision by the superintendent specifies the particular values and beliefs that will guide policy and practice within the schools and the district especially as they relate to district culture. Ideally, the school board and superintendent set a vision for all schools in the district and this vision must change as culture changes. As Peter Senge (1990) states, "At any one point there will be a particular image of the future that is predominant, but that image will evolve (p.472)." The leader who is able to adapt a vision to new challenges will be more successful in building a strong culture for a district's schools.

Although the superintendent plays a pivotal role in determining the culture of a district, creating a cultural vision should be a collaborative activity among superintendents, students, parents, and staff. Michael G. Fullan (1992) asked, "Whose vision is it?" "Principals," he said, "are blinded by their own vision when they must

manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it. It is imperative to create a shared vision that allows for collaborative school cultures is imperative (Stolp, 2009). Strong leadership is essential to an organization's success (Marzano & Waters 2006).

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to review and examine the literature as it pertains to superintendents, leadership and the culture of a school district. This review of previous research provides a framework for understanding the superintendency, the reasons for superintendent turnover, the frequency of turnover and understanding culture and climate as they relate to school districts. Research on superintendent turnover and culture has been conducted separately, but there is a lack of concrete study on the influence that superintendent turnover has upon the culture of a district. Strong leaders must anticipate the needs of all stakeholders when planning a vision for the district that positively impacts its culture. In addition to needing to assess stakeholder needs, a superintendent must also successfully navigate the politics and school board issues that exist within communities. They must address the myriad of challenges that lay in front of them to ensure success, avoid a negative impact on the culture of the district and ensure student achievement and success remain their focus, while not overlooking the impact of organizational culture on these outcomes. When superintendent turnover in districts is frequent, there is bound to be an influence on the organizational culture. Leaders that have neglected to create a vision, trust and meaning have failed to empower those within their organizations (Bennis & Nanus, 2007).

Most of the literature reviewed is primarily empirical research, and only a small sample is theoretical. This insight was relative to the study in determining the direction

of the study and the questions to be posed to participants to determine the influence of superintendent turnover on the district.

The researcher found this topic intriguing and of great interest in their work as a district office employee, an administrator for the past 10 years, and an educator for 17 years. During the researcher's time as an administrator, the educational landscape has changed significantly, with increased federal and local mandates, decreased funding and increased levels of stress for administrators at all levels, making the cultural underpinnings of a district an even more imperative area of inquiry.

The synthesis of the literature review was based on common themes and the relevant empirical evidence was examined. The constructs of leadership in the superintendency and the influence of frequent turnover on the culture of a district will contribute to greater understanding of districts' cultural influences. Although the needs of districts across the country vary, consistency and longevity in leadership are imperative to school and district success.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative, ethnographic cross-case analysis case study to examine the complexities associated with frequent superintendent turnover and its influence on culture in a suburban K-12 school district. This chapter describes the procedures the researcher used to collect, organize and ultimately analyze the data. The methodology of the study is organized into the following sections: (a) research questions, (b) method, (c) design, (d) setting, (e) sample, (f) instrument and (g) data collection.

The influence of high superintendent turnover on the culture of a district is of particular interest to this researcher and their work as a district office staff member. There is ample research on the impact of superintendent turnover and school board relations, superintendent turnover and the impact on student achievement and the reasons why superintendents frequently leave districts. This study was conducted to uncover the influence superintendent turnover has on the culture of a district, as there is little existing research that addresses this problem.

A qualitative, ethnographic cross-case analysis case study allowed the researcher to provide more detailed information on this area of inquiry and analysis of real-life stakeholder examples and experiences of the influence turnover has on district culture more effectively than a quantitative design could. There is a story to be told from this district that can contribute to existing research and educator understanding, which can only be determined through qualitative methods.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are much easier to measure in quantitative research than in qualitative research. Qualitative research uses an approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings such as a “real world setting, letting it unfold naturally where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” so the researcher gains a better understanding of the problem (Patton, 2001, p. 39). Examining the data for reliability and validity assesses both the research’s objectivity and credibility. Validity relates to the honesty and authenticity of the research data, while reliability relates to the ability to reproduce the findings.

The validity of research findings refers to the extent to which the findings are an accurate representation of the phenomena they are intended to represent. Validity can be substantiated by a number of techniques including the triangulation of contradictory evidence, respondent validation, and constant comparison.

Trustworthiness is critical to ensure reliability in qualitative research. Research methods that are well-established help to ensure credibility, which in turn impacts trustworthiness. As an employee of the district, the researcher has a familiarity with the culture of the district and is trusted by the current staff. Informants’ data was compared so that their viewpoints can be verified against others to create a vivid picture of the events based on the stakeholder contributions. All participants were provided the opportunity to choose not to participate; this ensured the participants were willing to provide the information needed by the researcher. Member checking and disconfirming evidence dissuaded scrutiny and strengthened the validity of the data collection.

Achieving validity in qualitative research refers to the “appropriateness” of the chosen tools, processes, protocols and collection of the data. If the research question is valid for the outcomes, the choice of methodology is suitable for responding to the research question, ensuring the validity of the design and methodology, the appropriateness of the data analysis and sampling, and finally the validity of the results and conclusions for the sample and context. To ensure validity, the choice of methodology must permit the uncovering of phenomena for it to be valid with regard to cultural variables.

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the ability to replicate the results/process, which can be challenging due to the descriptive and narrative form the research takes, making consistency important to verify the accuracy.

Establishing validity and reliability in qualitative research was achieved in this study through peer evaluation of data analysis, member checks, and peer evaluation of the instruments.

Research Questions

This qualitative, ethnographic cross-case analysis case study was guided by the following research questions:

Primary RQ 1. How has the frequent turnover of superintendents influenced the culture of a suburban K-12 district?

Secondary RQ 2. How do administrators describe the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

Secondary RQ 3. How do teachers describe the influence of frequent district superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

Secondary RQ 4. How do the district support staff describe the influence of frequent district superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

Secondary RQ. 5. How do administrators', teachers' and support staff's perceptions and experiences vary? Are they similar or different?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology and methods used for participant selection, as well as data collection and analysis.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study. Qualitative methods are typically used to collect information, opinions, knowledge and experiences of people. Qualitative research is considered an “interpretive paradigm,” which emphasizes the meanings and experiences of the study participants. Qualitative research helps explain how people interpret their environment, and experiences, and what meaning they place on those experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Ethnographic research methodology allows the researcher to study the participants in their “real life” or natural environment to gain a greater understanding of their experiences. The history of ethnography began with the early fieldwork of Clifford Geertz, Margaret Mead, and Bronislaw Malinowski. Ethnography, a qualitative research method, seeks to understand and describe another way of life from an insider's point of view. Malinowski (1922) stated that the goal of ethnography is “to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world (p. 25)”. Spradley (1979) states, “Ethnography offers us the chance to step outside of our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, if only for a brief period,

and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems (p.25)’’.

The use of ethnographic methods assists the researcher to determine the meaning of actions and events in the experiences of the people we seek to understand. Both questions and answers must be discovered in the studied social setting, rather than through manipulated variables or from a research hypothesis standpoint.

Cross-case analysis is a research method that enables a comparison of the similarities and differences in activities, experiences, events and activities that are being analyzed in a case study. Cross-case analysis allows the researcher to examine factors that may contribute to the outcomes of the case, as well as seek or construct an explanation as to why one case or group is different or the same as others. Cross-case analysis helps to further the researcher’s ability to understand and compare relationships or findings and compare settings, communities or groups (Ragin, 1997).

Research Design

The design of the study is a qualitative case study. Case studies assist the researcher to respond to an explanatory research topic using how or why questions to analyze the events over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 1994, 2004). Often, cases can have many variables (Cresswell, 1998). Additionally, case studies can analyze “sensitive dynamic interactions” amongst the study participants and the setting of the study (Hussey & Hussey, 1997. p.1).

In an educational research context, qualitative interviewing requires more intense listening than typical conversations, a respect/curiosity about what the principals say, a

readiness to recognize what is not understood, and the ability to question what is not yet known (Rubin & Rubin, 2002, p.6.).

Case study design is used to provide a description and analysis of individuals (each person's history, situation, activity, life, etc.), a group of people (students, teachers, a school, etc.), or a problem, process, happening or event in an organization in detail (Yin, 1981).

A case study could be considered a form of empirical inquiry that allows investigation of a phenomenon within the “real life context when the lines are blurred between the phenomenon and setting are not clear” (Yin, 1981. p. 59). Case study research allows the exploration and interpretation of complex issues. In many cases, a case study selects a limited number of participants as the subjects in the study. Yin (1984) defines the case study research method as

an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; We seek to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompasses important contextual conditions – because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study. (Yin & Davis, 2007)

Through the use of an interview protocol, interview participants were asked to provide responses to questions posed in semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. Participants provided their background information and responses to the questions so the researcher could gain knowledge related to the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the school district. These questions lead to discussions about hidden and unhidden influences, leadership styles, school board and

community involvement and the influence of teachers and support staff unions, furthering the discussion surrounding the daily complexities faced by superintendents in leading school districts and the resulting influences upon district culture.

The use of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research allowed participants the opportunity to offer in-depth responses regarding their experiences working under several superintendents in the district and allowed them to discuss their knowledge, opinions, feelings, thoughts, beliefs and experiences over a period of time (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) further expanded on the use of qualitative methods, which recognize that “understanding comes from trying to put oneself in the other person’s shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act, and feel (p.49.)”

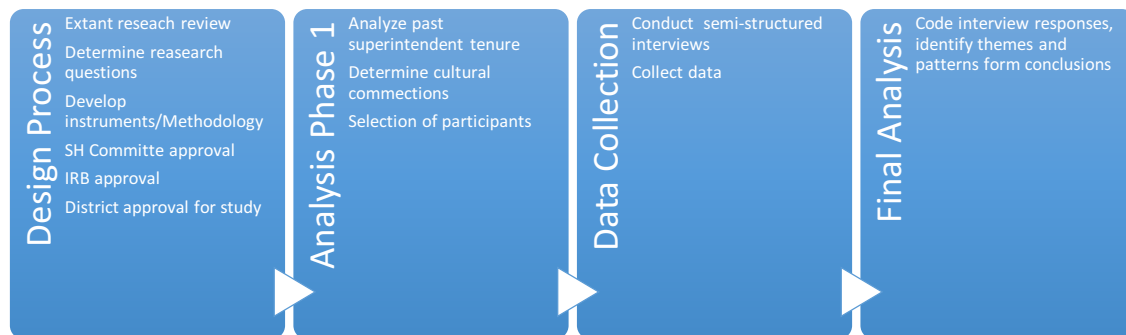


Figure 3.1 Qualitative Ethnographic Case Study Research Process Protocol

The qualitative ethnographic case study design consisted of four distinct phases found in Figure 3.1 above, the *Qualitative Ethnographic Case Study Research Process Protocol*:

- Design Process
- Analysis - Phase 1
- Data Collection

- Final Analysis

Setting

The setting of the study was a suburban K-12 School District in the northeastern United States. The district is classified as a school district on the “Urban Fringe of a Large City -Suburban” by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The township is 21 square miles on the “fringe” of an urban area and consists of 65,000 residents. The school district serves approximately 6,400 students and employs more than 400 teachers. The district serves students in six grade K-6 elementary schools, two grade 7-8 middle schools and one grade 9-12 high school. Five of the nine schools receive federal Title I funding, and four do not. Title I funding is provided by a federal program that arranges additional funding to school districts to advance the academic achievement of disadvantaged students. It is a proportional part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). Title I programs provide monetary grants to school districts from the federal government based on percentages of disadvantaged student populations.

Over the past several years, the district has been under pressure due to frequent administrative turnover and public scrutiny from the community. The district administrative team consists of one superintendent, an assistant to the superintendent, two directors, nine principals, six assistant principals and six supervisors of curriculum and special education.

The district has had four superintendents in the past six years. The average tenure of superintendents in the district is 3.2 years. Due to this recent frequent superintendent turnover and the large number of staff (235) who have worked in the district for more than 18 years and can provide firsthand accounts of the district culture over a long period

of time, the district is an appropriate setting for determining the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture from the perspective of long-term staff from multiple positions.

District Enrollment of Students

TYPE	PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT
Asian	12.78
American Indian	.12
Black	13.81
Hispanic	15.75
Multi-Racial	1.61
White	55.86
Economically Disadvantaged	51.93
English Language Learners	7.36
Special Education	18.12
Female	48.78
Male	51.27
Gifted	4.46
Pacific Islander	0.02

Figure 3.2 District Enrollment of Students

Superintendent History in the Profiled District

In the years after the district was established, superintendent turnover was non-existent. However, in later years, superintendent tenure in the district has become much shorter. A history and timeline of sitting superintendents is profiled below:

Superintendent # 1 1923-1940

Superintendent # 2 1940-1950

Superintendent # 3 1952-1970

Superintendent # 4 1973-1982

Superintendent # 5 1982-1994

Superintendent # 6 1995-1996

Superintendent # 7 1996-2001

Superintendent # 8 2001-2006

Superintendent # 9 2006-2009

Superintendent # 10 2009-2011

Superintendent # 11 2011-2015

Superintendent # 12 2015 – Present

In the district profiled in this study, over a 71-year period from 1923-1994, the average tenure of the first five sitting district superintendents was 13.2 years. From 1995-2016, an 21-year period, the seven sitting district superintendents' average tenure was 3.14 years. (These figures do not include “interim” or temporary superintendents who served.) Cited reasons for superintendents leaving the district in the past several years have included voluntary reasons, family obligations, other opportunities, and community scrutiny.

Sample

A researcher must spend sufficient time collecting, analyzing and examining the data to understating the “variations in the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009), p.8). The researcher made contact with potential participants via email to request their participation in the study. Upon receiving replies, the researcher selected participants that served in the district longer than three years. (All replies were recorded, and alternate participants were considered for selection in the event others had to rescind their acceptance.)

The researcher reached out to the selected participants to schedule interviews at times and places convenient to the participants to ensure their comfort during the process. Once the interview schedule was created, the researcher called and confirmed the timing prior to the scheduled interviews. The researcher interviewed staff who have been in the district for three years or more to provide rich narrative examples of the district culture over an extended period of time. The intention was to determine changes in district culture over time. Literature supports use of participants with insight of three years or beyond to ensure a more connected examination of relevant data.

The researcher took the role of interviewer in the study. The researcher ensured flexibility when creating the schedules. Relevant to the integrity of the researcher is the researcher’s position or what is referred to as reflexivity: “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the human as instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183).

The researcher is employed in the field of education as a district office administrator in the district where the study was conducted. The researcher has a combined tenure of 17 years in education, 10 of which have been as a principal and

district office administrator. The researcher made every effort to remain unbiased and objective when analyzing the research data.

Sampling Techniques

Due to the intensive method data collection required in the study, the researcher selected a total of 14 participants from each identified group below:

- administrators (2)
- principals (2)
- teachers (6)
- support staff (4)

There were a total of 14 semi-structured interviews conducted.

Purposive sampling was used during the selection of participants. A purposive sampling strategy aims for heterogeneity with the intent to understand how the phenomenon (here the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture) is seen and understood among different groups of people (administrators, principals, teachers and support staff) in different settings (different schools and offices within the district).

A letter of invitation was sent via email to solicit participants willing to participate in the interviews. Participants with more than three years' experience working in the district were considered. Those with less than three years in the district were eliminated from consideration as it was decided their experience would not provide a full picture of the district culture over time. A follow-up phone call was made to each willing participant to arrange a mutually agreed upon interview time and place. Each participant signed an informed consent letter (Appendix A). Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews.

Once a participant pool of 25 was identified, the researcher selected a small number of participants (N =14) from amongst administrators, principals, teachers and support staff to maximize the diversity of respondents and viewpoints relevant to the research questions. (Letter of Solicitation can be found in Appendix B.)

Selection of Study Participants

Merriam (2002) states that researchers should be involved in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Therefore, participants were selected who met specific criteria: they had to be current district employees for three years or more in specific positions that included district administration, building-level principals, teachers at the elementary, middle and high school level and support staff.

Small participant research, also known as “small n research,” is the expected norm in qualitative research. A smaller study (14 participants) enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences and to develop a thick, rich description of these experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). (Informed Consent Form can be found in Appendix C.)

The researcher followed the IRB-specific guidelines for contacting the purposefully selected participants for the study and provided them with a solicitation letter and a consent form that informed them of all the protocols regarding confidentiality and their option to remain anonymous. The documents also outlined the study purpose, participants, voluntary participation, data storage methods and the study design.

All study participants enthusiastically volunteered and were honest and forthright in their responses to the questions during the semi-structured interviews. One participant

remarked that the topic was “intriguing and could have an impact” on the district, which is why they wanted to participate.

Population/Participants

Participants were selected from the following pool of building-level staff from each of nine buildings and the district office (100+ possible participants in 10 locations)

- District principals (two selected)
- District-level administrators (two selected)
- District-level teachers (six selected-2 elementary; 2 middle; 2 high school)
- District support staff (four selected)

The in-person interviews took place in environments chosen by the participants to ensure there was no sense of danger, intimidation or coercion and to ensure participants responded truthfully and critically to the questions posed. Participants were offered interview locations both in (home, building or office) or out of the district (at a location of the participant’s choice) to ensure the highest level of comfort for the participant.

The researcher sought a voluntary sample of school district staff who have been working the district for a period longer than three years to ensure they worked under the leadership of prior superintendents who recently left the district. The current superintendent was appointed a year prior to the study.

The study participants were identified as Principal A, Principal B, Administrator A, Administrator B, Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, Teacher E, Teacher F, Support Staff A, Support Staff B, Support Staff C and Support Staff D (see Figure 3.3 - Study Participant Chart and Figure 3.4 - Participant Demographics below).

Study Participant Chart

District Staff Study Participants	Number of Participants
District Administrators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrator A • Administrator B 	2
Building-Level Principals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal A • Principal B 	2
Elementary Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher A • Teacher B 	2
Middle School Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher C • Teacher D 	2
High School Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher E • Teacher F 	2
Support Staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Staff A • Support Staff B • Support Staff C 	4

• Support Staff D	
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Figure 3.3 Study Participants

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Years in District	Years in Education	Degree Attained	Number of Superintendents Served Under
1. SS A	M	10	10	Bachelor's	5
2. AD A	M	16	28	Master's	8
3. TC A	F	13	13	Master's	6
4. SS B	M	8	20	Master's	5
5. PR A	M	16	24	Master's	8
6. PR B	M	14	20	Doctorate	7
7. TC E	F	18	21	Master's	9
8. TC C	F	21	24	Master's	9
9. SS C	F	5	17	Bachelor's	3
10. AD B	F	7.5	15	Master's	5
11. SS D	F	22	22	Bachelor's	9
12. TC B	F	23	27	Master's	9
13. TC D	F	6	9	Master's	3
14. TC F	F	9	16	Master's	5

Figure 3.4 Participant Demographics

Figure Key

SS-Support Staff
AD-Administrator
PR-Principal

A-Group Participant 1
B-Group Participant 2
C-Group Participant 3

E-Group Participant 5
F-Group Participant 6

Instrument/Data Collection

The interview was considered the instrument of data collection and analysis. In qualitative research, the data examined consists of narrative descriptions based upon interviews and observations made during interviews in the data collection phase of the study. In the present study, the researcher sought to describe the characteristics of the group of participants found in the district, including district administrators, principals, teachers and support staff. The primary data collection instrument was the use of semi-structured interviews that were recorded and then transcribed before coding and analysis.

The researcher used a pre-designed interview protocol to guide interaction with the interview participants based on Spradley's (1979) taxonomy of interview questions used in ethnographic interviews, which includes the following to obtain details of the participant's stories and experiences: mini-tour, grand tour, experience, specific, contrast, follow-up and probing questions. This protocol was designed to serve as a checklist/guide for items to be covered during the semi-structured interviews. During the data collection process, the researcher reviewed the interview questions when coding the data looking for themes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 60-90 minute increments, with one session scheduled for each participant at their selected locations, allowing the participants time to reconstruct their experiences in a comfortable, natural environment. Kirk and Miller (1986) stated that the study of a case phenomenon in its natural context involves watching people in their environment and working with them in their spaces and within

their terms; thus, the researcher's field work allows the researcher to interact with participants in their natural settings.

Interviews began with a grand tour question. Each participant was asked to describe their work in the district. Their responses lead to mini-tour questions regarding their perceptions of employees and the state of the district culture. Questions were framed to facilitate participants' personal stories regarding their employment in the district and the state of its culture. From their responses, further probes were possible about their experiences in the district as related to the organizational culture. Next, further mini-tour questions were posed regarding staff perceptions of the culture of the organization and the influence that superintendent turnover has had upon the culture. Based on those responses, the researcher asked for examples and posed more specific questions, if needed. Contrast questions were posed to determine the participants' perceptions to ascertain differences between male and female as well as differing perceptions of staff in different positions throughout the organization.

The interpretations/perspectives of the staff related to the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of the district were revealed. The researcher sought to interpret the stories and experiences and uncover their meanings to understand the influence of this turnover on the district culture.

The administrators, principals, teachers and support staff interpreted the culture from their own perspectives. They explained the context of their experiences; their beliefs, experiences, feelings, and theories; significant internal and external factors; how superintendent personalities or leadership styles might have been perceived from other points of view; and which superintendent tenures were most influential upon the culture

of the district. The researcher was able to analyze potential shared meanings and gradations found amongst differing groups of district staff, including administrators, principals, teachers and support staff, covering wide perspectives across the district at several levels of the organization.

The intricacies and deep intensity of the information compiled from the semi-structured interviews helped to depict the complexities and challenges that each superintendent faced during their transitions and the ultimate impact of turnover on the district culture for those left behind.

Once the interviews were completed, the audio-taped interviews were transcribed directly by the researcher for data analysis. The researcher used the coding software Dedoose to assist in coding the interview transcripts to determine emerging themes. The process of transcribing the interviews allowed the researcher to thoroughly review the details of the interviews for the purpose of analysis and data reporting.

The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed to detail the “expanded account” (Spradley, 1979, p. 66) of the participant. The data obtained from interviews and subsequent transcriptions were coded and organized into themes and subthemes for analysis. The researcher analyzed the participants’ insights, perceptions, awareness, experiences and understandings that were found within the recurrent themes, subthemes and patterns that arose.

All references to the specific school district, direct positions/titles or any specific programming or terminology in use by the school district were deleted to comply with assurances made in the IRB correspondence with the study participants in order to ensure

the anonymity of the participants. Steps were taken to ensure the identities of the interview participants and the positions they hold were kept confidential. Participants who agreed to share their experiences in the semi-structured interviews were assured that their identities would be protected. Each participant signed an informed consent document before the interview. Pseudonyms were used in the report of this study with regard to participant and district names; moreover, identifiable characteristics of specific locations/positions were used minimally to ensure absolute confidentiality. “Although policies, guidelines, and codes of ethics have been developed by the federal government, institutions, and professional associations, actual ethical practice comes down to the individual researcher’s own values and ethics” (Merriam, 2009).

The goal of the first phase of analysis was to identify categories and themes within the data. The second phase of data analysis consisted of reviewing the transcripts and coding was implemented (Saldana, 2009). Quotations from participant interviews were used to accentuate identified themes using a single-case analysis of the entire group of participants. This use of intense universal view and description analysis is paramount in the beginning stages of qualitative analysis (Merriam, 2009). The third phase of the analysis involved a cross-case analysis to determine similarities and differences in responses among and between the participant groups, namely, administrators, principals, teachers and support staff. Researchers can strengthen reliability and validity by analyzing a range of similarities and differences within and between groups. The thematic cross-case analysis helped to identify and build generalizations, interconnectedness and paradoxes within the data and develop conclusions that accurately represented the experiences of the participants.

A Qualitative Contact Summary Sheet (Appendix A) was used to assist the researcher in coding and analyzing the interview transcripts. Member checks were utilized to ensure practitioners involved in the process read and evaluated the report(s) to assess the usefulness, accuracy and soundness of the presented data.

Categories were coded and listed. Coding procedures were used by the researcher to examine the data for meaning, influences, and implications. From the analysis conducted by the researcher, specific themes and patterns emerged for each of the staff members, and across staff position levels.

The researcher was also able to extricate real-life examples from comments made during the interviews. The interviews were categorized and then coded according to staff position. The frequency of each theme was then calculated for recurring themes. Direct themes within and across groups were then coded and aligned for analysis to determine their implications for district cultural practices related to the turnover of superintendents and the influence on district culture.

Lastly, the researcher developed a taxonomy of the themes that emerged throughout the entire content analysis process. To ensure the dependability of the study's findings, during the data collection and analysis process, the researcher continuously reflected on her position as a district administrator, as well as her professional experience and knowledge of the topic, to ensure that the data gathered and analyzed was authentic and in no way biased by assumptions (Roberts, 2010). At all times, the researcher sought to represent in an authentic manner the accurate perspectives of the participants collected through the qualitative approach by using participants "own words" to illustrate the data whenever possible (Creswell, 2009).

Summary

This chapter has discussed how the researcher executed the study. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to collect data to address, either explicitly or implicitly, the purpose of the research study. This chapter also discussed the role of the researcher, the stages of research and the method of data analysis.

The purpose of the study was to conduct a qualitative, cross-case analysis case study to discover the perceptions of groups of district staff regarding the influence of frequent superintendent turnover in a school district on the district's culture, as evidenced by information gathered in semi-structured interviews with administrators, principals, teachers and support staff. The questions posed were relevant to the research questions and the literature reviewed. The analysis was consistent with the research design and methodology and served to assist the researcher to analyze the data, which is presented in Chapter IV and the finding from which are presented in Chapter V.

The analytical approach in Chapter III addressed the research questions through the recognition of common themes related to the overall topic of the impact of frequent superintendent turnover on district culture to then draw conclusions based upon the results and analysis of the 14 semi-structured interviews. Finding the similarities, differences, pivotal events, perceptions and outlooks of multiple stakeholders allowed an examination of the culture as a whole as it related to the influence of frequent superintendent turnover. This approach allowed the researcher to determine (from the subjects' perspectives) what occurred to create a current picture of and reasoning for the current culture and the factors that have influenced it.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The journey to uncovering district staff experiences while investigating the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the school district revealed several themes. In order to understand the perspectives of staff members in a K-12 suburban school district in the northeast section of the country, the interview participants responded to a succession of questions and shared their personal experiences in the roles of administrators, principals, teachers or support staff in the district. Interviewed staff discussed the influences of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district, and perceptions from different positions were compared.

The responses of the interview participants provided an understanding of the perspectives of staff at different levels of the organization to reveal how the district culture has been influenced by frequent superintendent turnover in the district. The insights and reflections revealed by staff members in the interviews provided eye-opening data that allowed the researcher to identify recurring themes that will assist district administrators, school board members and the larger educational community to understand the influence frequent superintendent turnover has had upon the district culture.

Background of the Study

Evolving from a “one-room school house” community at its onset, the district profiled in this study is a northeastern U.S. suburban K-12 school district that now has an enrollment of approximately 6,500 students. The district is “on the fringe” of a large

urban east coast city that has been plagued by frequent superintendent turnover over the last 11 years. Many have speculated that this turnover has had a direct impact on the culture of the district over this period of time, in comparison to earlier years when superintendent turnover was much less frequent.

The township is home to over 65,000 residents and is a total of 21 square miles. The total operating budget for the school district in the 2016-2017 school year is \$147.6 million. School district revenues total \$141,615,407. These funds are generated from local sources (73%), state sources (22%), federal sources (1%) and other forms of financing (4%). The school district faces the challenges of a very diverse and changing community. The student population is diverse socioeconomically, ethnically, racially, religiously and in educational experiences. The district partners with numerous community service organizations, local township representatives and the township police department to create and sustain an environment that supports educational excellence for each individual student. The district is home to nine schools, consisting of six elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. Student registration is processed through residency in the district, and students are assigned to specific elementary and middle schools based on neighborhood residency. There is only one public high school for township residents to attend. The school district profiled has a 92% graduation rate, which is higher than the state average of 89%. Approximately 56% of students are eligible for free or reduced-fare lunch. Five of the nine schools are classified as Title I. “Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high

numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (U.S. D.O.E., 2016).

The student population consists of the following demographics:

- Asian 18%
- Black 16%
- White 51 %
- Hispanic 10%
- Other 5%

The unemployment rate in the township ranged from 9.7% in June 1992 to 3.3% in April 2000. The current unemployment rate for the township is 5.2%, as of October of 2016.

(XXX District Comprehensive Plan-Name deleted for anonymity.)

The school district is the local educational system that functions within the laws of the state. The district is run by a school board and the superintendent, who is appointed through school board approval. The school board is comprised of nine locally elected, unpaid community members who create policy and conduct the business of the school district within the laws of the state and the State Department of Education. There is a treasurer and secretary appointed by the School Board. School board members are elected by township residents and hold the elected office for four years. The School Board is a policy making body whose authority is derived from state law, working within the limits of School Board policy and manage the school system.

The district (name removed for anonymity) has faced intense media scrutiny over the past several years. Multiple district employees were arrested in a 1.7 million-dollar theft ring and corruption scandal related to the discovery of district-purchased gasoline

and auto parts and allegations of “ghost employees.” This theft was alleged to have occurred over a 10-year period, which coincides with increased frequency of superintendent turnover in the district.

The district had a history of “stable” sitting superintendents from 1923-1994, a 71-year period. During this time, the five sitting district superintendents’ average tenure was 13.2 years. However, from 1995-2016, a 21-year period, the seven sitting district superintendents’ average tenure was 3.14 years, and turnover was much more frequent. (These figures do not include “interim” or temporary superintendents who served.) Cited reasons for superintendents leaving the district in the past several years have included voluntary reasons, family obligations, other opportunities, and community scrutiny.

Many in the district have discussed the district culture and searched for root causes of what they believe has negatively influenced the district culture. After reviewing research on the influence of superintendent turnover on student achievement, relationships with school boards, increased federal, state and local mandates and funding inequities for districts, it was determined that there is not a rich or deep base of research regarding the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a district. This ultimately lead to the researcher to the idea for this dissertation topic and its research questions. It is hoped that by examining the experiences of district staff across multiple positions, the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture can be better understood and assist in shaping and forming the direction(s) the district takes in the future. This study also adds to the research base, which is lacks examination of the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of school districts.

Themes/Sub-Themes

When analyzing and coding the interview participant responses, the following themes and sub-themes emerged:

- I. Superintendent Turnover/Change**
 - a. Leadership Style**
 - b. Communication**
 - c. Vision**
 - d. Decisions**
 - e. Relationships**
- II. Influences**
 - a. Politics**
 - b. Mayor**
 - c. School Board**
 - d. Community**
 - e. Union**
 - f. Federal/State Mandates**
- III. Culture**
 - a. Morale**
 - b. Conflict**
 - c. Motivation**
 - d. Instability**
 - e. Turnover**
- IV. Outcomes**
 - a. State of the District**
 - b. Focus on Students' Needs**
 - c. View of the Superintendent Position**
 - 1. "Temporary Help"**

Theme Analysis

Themes and subthemes were categorized according to the participant responses in semi-structured interviews with the researcher (See Table 4.1 below):

- Participants who mentioned a specific area/topic/theme during their semi-structured interview were marked with an "X" in the chart below.
- Totals in the last column indicate the total number of participants who addressed or identified a particular area/topic or theme within the semi-structured interviews with the researcher.

	A D A	A D B	P R A	P R B	T C A	T C B	T C C	T C D	T C E	T C F	S S A	S S B	S S C	S S D	
Themes/Sub-Themes															Total
<i>Theme 1 Superintendent Change and Turnover</i> “Change Appears to Be Inevitable”															
Leadership Style	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	14/ 14
Communication	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	14/ 14
Vision	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	13/ 14
Decisions	X	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	11/ 14
Relationships	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X			X	10/ 14
<i>Theme 2 Influences</i> “Power, and Politics”															
Politics	X	X		X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X	10/ 14
Mayor	X			X									X		3/1 4
School Board	X		X	X	X						X	X			6/1 4
Community	X	X		X	X		X			X	x	X	X		9/1 4
Union	X	X											X		3/1 4
Federal/State Mandates										X		X		X	3/1 4
<i>Theme 3 Culture</i>															

<i>“The Tree of Life”</i>															
Morale	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	13/ 14
Conflict	X	X	X	X		X	X			X			X	X	9/1 4
Motivation		X		X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	10/ 14
Instability		X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X		X	X	10/ 14
Turnover		X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		10/ 14
<i>Theme 4 Outcomes</i> <i>“You Are Just Temporary Help-Will You Stay or Will You Go?”</i>															
State of the District	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	14/ 14
Focus on Students’ Needs		X			X	X	X	X	X	X					7/1 4
View of Superintendent Position	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	14/ 14
“Temporary Help”	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	12/ 14

Table 4.1 Theme Analysis Chart

Table Key

SS-Support Staff
AD-Administration
PR-Principal
TC-Teacher

A-Group Participant 1
B-Group Participant 2
C-Group Participant 3
D-Group Participant 4

E-Group Participant 5
F-Group Participant 6

The participants in the study revealed insights related to each of the identified themes and subthemes that further the understanding of the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district. There were many identified influences on the district's culture related to the frequent superintendent turnover.

Interview Findings: Primary Research Question 1

The **Primary Research Question (RQ 1)** in this study was: **How has the frequent turnover of superintendents influenced the district culture?**

Perceptions of the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district varied according to staff member position. The question was answered first by comparing the frequency of responses by staff members that served as employees of the profiled district between 3 and 28 years. Interview participants served in any of four positions in the district: as administrators, principals, teachers or support staff. Themes were compared and contrasted relative to staff positions and the frequency of discussion during the semi-structured interviews to determine the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a K-12 suburban school district over a period of time. Interview participants served under 3-9 superintendents. (Interim or temporary superintendents were not included; only sitting or appointed superintendents were considered as part of the district turnover of superintendents in recent years, in comparison to a time when the tenure of superintendents was much more stable and long-term.) The results were compiled in Table 4.1 above, which provided some initial insight into the primary research question.

Themes that emerged related to superintendent turnover/change, influences, culture and outcomes, and further revealed surprising subthemes. When responding directly to the question of whether frequent superintendent turnover in the district has influenced district culture, interview participants described frustration, confusion, constantly changing leadership styles and a lack of stability and district vision that has had a negative influence on the district culture over time. Representatives from each of the four staff groups echoed their dissatisfaction with the frequent superintendent turnover and the resulting influence on district culture.

Cycles of Superintendent Turnover Confusion

Staff experiences indicate that there was frequent superintendent turnover in the district over a period of time, with some staff serving under more than eight superintendents. They note the “cycle” that is experienced culturally and structurally with the arrival of each new superintendent and the confusion that results when staff try to determine changing priorities as each transitions in and out of the district. When comparing the present to an earlier period of superintendent stability, participants identified the consistency that was related to longer-sitting superintendents in the district.

Administrator A described the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture as follows:

I think when you have, since I’ve been here for 16 years, I think we’ve had at least seven or eight superintendents in that time, some in the interim state, some for longer periods of time. I think it takes a couple of cycles to get the understanding of what needs to be done to move the district regardless of what your plan is and what binder you come with and say, ‘These are the things I want to get done.’ When you have turnover, the management team is constantly trying to figure out what the goals are, what’s most important, how we’re going to move, what’s the short-term gain, and I think that gets lost a lot of times

when you constantly are rotating people. There's different visions. Everybody has a different idea. Some people are more into the overall assessment of the student, some just want to hone in on math and science and everybody has their own management style as we have seen. They are moving targets, and we are dodging and weaving, trying to figure out our next move—in comparison to days when the position was stable, the district culture as a result was stable, as was the district vision and direction. (Administrator A)

Frozen Culture

Interview participants characterized the culture as being frozen, never moving ahead, having no stability, no vision and dodging and weaving the cultural impacts of frequent superintendent turnover. This leads one to surmise that all segments of the school staff indicate a negative influence on district culture from the frequent turnover of superintendents. In the past, when superintendents maintained their position for longer periods of time, staff felt more secure, more aware of expectations and generally felt the culture was less negatively impacted. Some interview participants spoke directly about more positive perceptions of district culture prior to the increased frequency in superintendent turnover in the district.

I think everybody says that everyone takes the direction from the top. If the direction is sound, clear, concise and everyone knows what they're doing and what the goals are, I think everyone's clear on that. Whether or not clearly articulated and you're constantly struggling to figure out where you fit into this big organizational chart, for lack of a better term, I think people are less apt to buy into the program. Every superintendent comes with their own plans. They all come with their own list of ten things that they want to get done in the next whatever years, and things happen, boards change, economic times change, the budget changes, and I think if there's no clear articulation at the top as to how things are going to get handled, how they're going to get—when there's an issue how is it going to get handled? Is it going to get washed under the carpet, you know, thrown under the carpet? It wasn't like that with longer sup terms. (Administrator A)

Some interview participants took the frequent superintendent turnover and resulting influences on district culture as very personal, especially those who were

students in the district at one time and have now enrolled their children as students in the district, and discussed the influence the turnover and its cultural implications have on students.

My kids go to school here. I went to school here, so it is very personal to me and it is very sad to me to have seen from the time I was a student here to what the culture in our district has become because as much as people don't understand this, it impacts the students. When you talk to the students, they have a very different experience and a very jaded outlook on our schooling system because the teachers share that with them and the principals share that with them. It really bleeds into everything and unfortunately, my kids, that's their school experience. (Administrator B)

Further echoing those sentiments, Administrator B also discussed the leadership expectations and leadership styles of the superintendents who have worked in the district and described the resulting culture as "frozen." This hinders the district staff from moving forward.

There needs to be a balance between being understanding and holding high expectations and follow through, rather than polar opposites of extreme favoritism and friendships or being on the warpath. We have had any and every style, and we can't move ahead with the constant turnover that has now impacted the culture to where we are frozen in place. (Administrator B)

Frequent superintendent turnover every "3-5 years" is now seen as the norm in comparison to an earlier era of superintendent stability when "15-20 years" was the described norm for Principal B.

Well, somewhere in my past education, I remember it used to be a superintendent could stay 15, 20 years, and now I believe the turnover rate is a superintendent is lucky if he lasts almost 2 years out of the 3-to-5 year contract. So, in my opinion, it has impacted the district in a negative way because there's no stability and there's no individual that actually gets to complete their term and complete any of the goals that they set out doing from their first year, like they used to over a longer period of time when the position was more stable. (Principal B)

District “Buy-In”

The continuous turnover of superintendents served as a source of frustration and negativity for staff, who have begun to have no faith that superintendents will remain in the district, which in turn influences district culture, as staff do not “buy in” to any new district initiatives, as no one “follows up.”

With the constant turnover, it gets to be frustrating every once in a while—all the negative comments with everyone thinking they don’t have to follow up because the superintendent will leave, and we will quickly have a new one. (Teacher B)

Damaged Vision

With the revolving door of superintendents, there is real damage done to the organization, as well as the implementation of the district superintendent “vision,” and, in turn, the resulting influence on district culture. Some interview participants described teachers as not even knowing who the superintendent is.

I think a lot of people are feeling a lack of leadership from the top, a lack of visibility. I have some teachers who don’t even know who the superintendent is, was or will be—they are so used to the turnover. (Teacher E)

Who Cares?

When further exploring the damage to the district caused by frequent superintendent turnover and its resulting cultural influence, the attitude of the staff shifted to one of “Who cares?” as they are not invested in, informed about or made a part of the culture of the district because administrators are “coming and going,” according to **Support Staff A**.

After so many administrators coming and going, the current culture of the district is, “Who cares? It doesn’t matter. Who cares?” We should do whatever we want because we have the ability to do so because we won’t be penalized otherwise. It never used to be like that before. (Support Staff A)

District staff felt disheartened that the district will never move forward as the superintendent changes were “constant” and had far-reaching effects on the culture and organization.

With constant change, we will never move ahead. (Support Staff C)

Good Old Days

Many interview participants lamented the “good old days” of stability in the superintendent seat in the district and the resulting positive influence on district culture, in comparison to the most recent nine-year period when superintendent turnover increased greatly. The district culture is now viewed by all 14 interview participants in a “negative” light.

Back in the day when the position was stable, superintendents usually were grown within and knew everything about it and all of the people. People were much happier in general, which created a more positive culture. (Principal A)

Interviewed staff discussed the current lack of district vision achieved through the frequent succession of superintendents and not knowing “what to follow.”

Right now, we don’t know the vision due to the continuous superintendent turnover, and no one knows if they should follow, which is hard when the vision is not clear and had become muddled with constant turnover. The old heads [old superintendents] made sure you knew what direction we were headed. (Support Staff B)

Overall Negative Influence

It is clear that district staff felt that frequent turnover of district superintendents in recent years has had a negative influence on the district culture, while more long-standing superintendent tenures are looked upon in a more positive light related to the district culture and the experiences of all interviewed groups in the district.

Significant Findings: Secondary Research Questions 2-5

Specific themes and subthemes emerged related to the following **Secondary**

Research Questions 2-5:

RQ 2 - How do administrators and principals describe the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

RQ 3 - How do teachers describe the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

RQ 4 - How do support staff describe the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district?

RQ 5 - How do administrator, principal, teacher and support staff perceptions and experiences vary? Are they similar or different?

Theme 1: Superintendent Change and Turnover: “Change Appears to Be Inevitable”

“Change alone is unchanging.”
Heraclitus (c. 535 BCE-c. 475 BCE), Greek philosopher

The data analysis revealed that factors related to the first theme, ***Superintendent Change and Turnover***, included the following subthemes in the participants’ narratives: *Leadership Style, Communication, Vision, Decisions and Relationships*, each of which influenced the participants’ views of the frequent district superintendent turnover and its resulting impact on district culture. Participants’ experiences with multiple superintendents over a period of time shaped their beliefs around each of the themes that emerged. It appeared that staff began to think of superintendent turnover and change and its influence on district culture as “inevitable” and appeared to become resigned to this “change,” viewed negatively, touching each segment of the organization.

When examining the influence of the theme of “change” that emerged regarding

the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture, participants in each of the distinct staffing groups (administrators, principals, teachers and support staff) seemed to agree that after experiencing the outcomes of varied leadership styles as a result of frequent superintendent turnover (whether perceived positively or negatively), there needs to be a “happy medium” between the polar opposite leadership styles, coupled with increased longevity in the district so that a superintendent can have a more positive influence on district culture.

Leadership style. All participants (14/14) and staff groups (administrators, principals, teachers and support staff) who were interviewed shared similar frustrations with the constant changes in leadership style that accompanied frequent superintendent turnover and the influence this has on district culture.

...They are moving targets, and we are dodging and weaving trying to figure out our next move, in comparison to days when the position was stable, the district culture as a result, was stable, as was the district vision and direction.
(Administrator A)

...but I do miss the fact that there is not someone who's willing to take action, be it right or wrong, be it harsh or not, compared to almost no action and what people can deem as a lack of support to accomplish our leadership goals. (Principal B)

The frequent turnover and continuous adjustment to superintendent leadership styles leaves staff with a feeling of unrest, being unsettled and unsure of what leadership style is a “best fit” for the district because no superintendent stays long enough to make a significant impact.

It [turnover] leaves a lot of questions and worries about what's coming next. We have a school improvement plan, we have a district improvement plan, and I don't feel like those are carried through from superintendent to superintendent. I think a lot of things are left hanging, like there's not ... What one superintendent has wanted or the way they wanted it done, and then we want to carry through with that or it's not, it's just never clear. (Teacher C)

We have seen different styles, but no one stays. (Support Staff C)

Communication. All interview participants (14/14) perceived significant deficits in communication as a result of the frequent turnover in superintendents and the resulting influences on district culture. It is suggested that a sense of openness in communication and support within an organization can be an enabler of trust (Ferre, 2001). However, the interview participants identified a lack of communication that influences both their feelings and experiences, as well as the district culture, in a negative manner.

The current culture of the district is like this: There's a boat, and everyone's in it rowing. There's some people rowing in one direction thinking they're working together. There's some people pretending to row in that direction and rowing the opposite way, smiling at you. Then there're people who are rowing in different directions, so the boat is just spinning in circles, with no clear communication from the top. (Administrator B)

Participants identified the imperative of clear communication to move the district forward, which has been thwarted by frequent superintendent turnover, resulting in a negative influence on district culture due to the constant change in the position and personalities, resulting in a feeling of instability. Some participants identify communication as missing and vital in moving the district forward to a more positive culture through longer tenure of district leadership. Staff "waits" to determine if leaders will remain.

Communication is necessary to move the district ahead. Some superintendents have done well, and others not so much. We are always waiting them out to figure out if they are staying. (Principal A)

Teachers identified the turnover as a negative influence on the culture because of the constant change and a lack of explanation.

It's [superintendent turnover is] a negative impact [on culture] from the teacher's perspective. There's change all the time, and there's sometimes not explanations for it. The different personalities that have existed may have brought you to the place, and then it changes, and it can be like night and day, with no answers of why. (Teacher B)

Those who feel they communicate well find the lack of communication frustrating and confusing during superintendent transitions.

Communication's been very difficult where we haven't had time to prepare. Things have been sprung upon us with very little time to do anything about it. I'm a communicator, so that's, I think, what glares with me. {I would like to see more feedback, maybe directly from the superintendent because as teachers, I don't feel like we know where anything's coming from.} That would be my biggest issue, and I know that it has to do with the transition of a superintendent. I feel like we're kind of in the dark. (Teacher D)

The communication, lack of or inconsistencies due to turnover, I think it just gives—I think this is probably going to reiterate some of what I just said—it just gives a sense of instability and just lack of cohesion and lack of focus, really. (Teacher F)

Vision. Vision was an area identified by the majority of participants (13/14) who discussed how the changing district visions with each new superintendent had a negative influence on the culture of the district.

The vision of the superintendent changes every time another one comes. (Administrator A)

The significant impact on the culture in our district is the lack of direction and lack of vision. With each turnover of superintendent, each building feels it a different way, but there seems to be a new direction or a lack of direction. (Administrator B)

The vision of the changing superintendents affects the culture of the district... Too often were kind of led to "Let's really take a step back and think the process through or retreat." This leaves us unsure of what the vision is. (Principal A)

Frequent turnover reinforces the belief that "no one is in charge" in the district, and that belief has persisted for years, making it difficult to believe in and follow incoming superintendents.

We look at them [superintendents] as the figure head. We would look at them as where is our district going, and if they have a clear plan in place and have people supporting them underneath them I think we can go somewhere and people have a positive outlook. I feel lately there's been no—I don't think anyone knows who's in charge right now, and that's one of, I think, our biggest problems. Nothing against our new superintendent, I just think this has been years that no one knows who's in charge. (Teacher C)

I would say that it [superintendent turnover] has a definite effect on the culture of the building, of the district, because each person brings in their own vision and you never get to see a vision through and a lot of stuff gets stopped, thrown away, and then started again....I think there's a lack of consistency, there's a lack of buy-in with certain visions. Why should I buy in to this vision when they're going to leave us in three years anyway? Because it's going to change. (Teacher E)

If I'm honest, I think that there's probably not a real strong feeling of a clear overall vision. I think that piece is maybe lacking. Again, I go back to the word "apathy," I think. Just because of so many, many changes. I think the overall feeling, which is unfortunate, is towards, I think, the negative side and maybe, again, not quite understanding what the vision and the goals are....I guess I'd have to say a handful of years ago it seemed there was a much stronger focus on the standardized assessments and a clearer vision of the expectations for teachers and more close oversight, which I think really caused them to want to work at higher levels and achieve higher goals. (Teacher F)

In comparison to the administrators, principals and teachers interviewed, the support staff did not appear to be as concerned about the vision of the superintendent and the influence of superintendent turnover on district culture, with the exception of Support Staff D who believed that the vision of superintendents' and their influence over culture was "tainted" because staff is always unsure of what they are doing and what direction they are going in. During the interview, this participant mentioned the "spiraling" downward of the overall district vision related to the frequent turnover and ensuing confusion.

The vision is always suspect with high turnover. People are unsure, unsure what they're doing, where they're going and what direction we're going in. (Support Staff D)

Decisions. Multiple participants (11/14) across all staffing groups noted that with the revolving nature of superintendents in the district they are seeing difficulty in following multiple directives and responses and no structure or clear-cut decisions being made. This is further negatively impacting district culture and causing staff to question whether the district even needs a superintendent.

But, I think that superintendents when they leave it just creates a vacuum. There's a lot of people wondering now when a superintendent used to make a decision, who's doing that now. It's like anything else. It's like a family when one family member's not there, there's always this struggle to figure out who's going to do what when they're not there and who's going to make the decisions. It's kind of like the leader, but, like I said, I think at some point I don't know if the position warrants all of that to replace it in a quick manner. I think too many times superintendents are replaced, and then the wrong choice is made, and now you have three superintendents in a short period of time because you pulled the trigger too quickly. (Administrator A)

The decisions, if any, are never permanent with the constant turnover, which impacts the culture. (Administrator B)

Even if staff did not like the decisions that were made by prior superintendents, they respected the leader's ability to make one final decision (rather than multiple decisions) and live with it.

I think that our prior superintendent, Dr. XXX, I enjoyed because he actually had structure in the sense that he was not afraid to take on difficult situations and make a decisive decision, be it right or wrong, whether it left you standing or dead, whether you were buried and you had to re-exhume the body, but at least he had enough courage to face those difficult questions and do something about it. (Principal B)

I notice one thing with the superintendents. What's been happening is that one hand is not talking to the other, so we're getting two conflicting or three conflicting answers to questions and no decision. (Teacher C)

The superintendent's ability to make decisions impacts culture, and is impacted by high turnover...Every decision that is based upon my superintendent's decisions, which then reflects on my ability to do my job, because my job is solely dependent on other individuals. (Support Staff A)

Relationships. Relationships appeared important to 10/14 participants, with the lowest responses coming from the support staff group, in which this subtheme arose with 2/4 or 50% of that group. While looking at the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on culture and the relationships within the culture, one staff member suggested that rather than “hiding” the superintendent should try to move forward in a positive manner in forming relationships at all levels of the organization and also noted possible ways to make relationship forming successful.

I think to change it [culture] in a positive direction, a superintendent has to be willing to get into the trenches, needs to be visible in the buildings, needs to develop a relationship not just with the direct people that they supervise but everybody who’s in the classroom, your aides, your transportation. They need to have a connection to everybody to make a positive difference. If you have a superintendent that’s in hiding that creates the opposite, the negative, the “Okay, well, they don’t care about me because I don’t see them. They don’t know me, they don’t even know who I am” kind of thing. (Teacher E)

However, one administrator cautioned against making too close a connection, or forming friendships, as they believed it compromised the superintendent as a leader.

Some superintendents come in and they want to be everybody’s friend, and they want to get to know everyone, and they are a little less apt to say “no,” and then the cycle comes where they have to, and it’s like when do they do it and to whom do they do it. Is it a political decision that they have to do or is it because of sound judgement and they feel that that’s the best policy to do it? (Administrator A)

Constant change in leadership at times causes a “circling of the wagons” by staff who stick close to those they have relationships with, which influences the culture of the district by not encouraging collaboration or trust.

With the constant change in administration, I think every day’s a new day when you have that. I think that it really chips away at any community and culture and it increases divides where people are now almost lower status than the where the teachers are going to gang up real tight together, and it creates separation because everyone’s trying to circle around each other and get each other’s back and protect them from what’s coming and from the change, essentially, because no one ever knows what to expect for long. (Administrator B)

I think if they were actually given more time to stick around, they would have a larger effect perhaps but I do not think when they stay only one to three years. (Principal B)

One teacher felt that with the succession of superintendents, relationships across the district suffered, further negatively influencing district culture.

There are a lot of things specifically that have happened this year that have not happened in the past, and people are upset about it. They're here to comfort children, but when they feel they are not supported through relationships that's a problem. (Teacher C)

One support staff member lamented the fact that the district no longer felt like a "family" as it had in the past due to the changes in leadership and their resulting influence on district culture. This participant offered suggestions for superintendents to make connections, and have a positive influence, rather than contribute to the currently perceived negative culture.

I think the biggest thing that a superintendent can do to have a positive reflection on their people is to listen, to observe and to make the individuals that are in your district feel as though they're a part of the district and they're being heard—that they're not just existing and they're not just people, they're not just workers. They're actually people, I guess is the best way to phrase it. We're a family. We should all have the same views and should all have the same goals. It shouldn't always be acted the same, but at the end of the day, everyone should feel they are heard, which hasn't happened here in a while with all the changes in administration. (Support Staff A)

Theme 2: Influences - "Power and Politics"

"Superintendents often times feel tremendous pressure from multiple segments of the community." (Ornstein & Levine, 2003)

The second theme, **Influences**, revealed that when staff were interviewed they were acutely aware of both internal and external influences and the "power and politics" that can impact district outcomes and culture, as well as the longevity of the superintendency. Both the internal and external influences that may impact and maintain

the continuous turnover of superintendents that they report in their interview narratives were perceived by participants as negatively influencing district culture.

When examining internal and external influences upon superintendent turnover and the district culture, politics (10/14) and community (9/14) emerged as the largest influences, followed by the school board, which 6/14 participants identified. Interestingly, local and national media cite increased mandates as a significant influence on superintendent turnover (Bocella, 2015), and the details of mandates dominate local conversations about the impact of superintendent turnover on student outcomes, and staff morale, however, only three of the fourteen participants (one teacher and two support staff) mentioned this as an influence.

The interview excerpts below from each of the groups depict staff who spoke directly about the “politics” (both regarding local elected officials or unstated internal district “politics” that they believe influenced the superintendent position) and its relation to turnover and district culture. An interview with a teacher also uncovered an unexpected reference to differences in perceptions of gender equity, in contrast to an administrator and principal who spoke of the officially “elected” political influences.

One staff member suggested that as superintendent, you must “pick your battles” and was concerned that the superintendents do not “stay long enough to dig in” to the real work that must be done in the position to move the district ahead.

Because that job does have tentacles to a lot of different groups, and they can make or break you depending on how you handle each one of those groups [school boards/union]. I’m not saying that you placate or promise things to certain groups just to get them off your back, but you’re going to have to do business with all of them at some point, and it’s just a matter of time as to which battle you pick to say, “This is the first battle I really have to dig in.” None of them stay long enough to really “dig in...” (Administrator A)

Politics. Ten of the fourteen interview participants indicated politics could have an influence on the superintendent position and turnover in the district and relayed their perceptions of the influence of politics on the district culture. “Politics, power and relations with the local school boards are among the most frequently cited reasons for superintendent turnover” (Mc Kay & Grady, 1994).

Many of the staff interviewed appeared to visibly hesitant, either by pausing during the interview, asking to have the question repeated or sheepishly smiling and asking again if the interview was anonymous when responding to questions on the influence of politics. The township was often called a “hotbed of political connections.”

This is a heavily dominated political area, everyone knows that. The mayor has board members that he talks to on how to vote on certain issues and that I think we suffer as the community and in our culture because the original intent of the board member running was to do something good and noble, and then I think it gets tainted when a phone call is made and he or she is told to vote a certain way on a certain issue. That’s when I think it gets a little seedy and a little tough to deal with. (Administrator A)

During the interviews, some of the responses interestingly distinguished between “outside” (the district) and “inside” (the district) perceptions of politics by the participants.

Outside politics. When discussing “outside politics”, staff members wished there was a clear separation of the superintendent from local township political activities, parties and politicians, as they felt there were undue influences.

I really think it is important that as much as a superintendent is the face of the district, I think it’s an extremely important decision and I hope that at some point we are able to separate the township politics, influences and the political aspect and do what’s right for kids. (Administrator B)

One staff member worried about outside political influences compromising the superintendent, district decisions and actions on a day-to-day basis as they felt

superintendents were more responsive to township politicians and their “wants” than the identified “needs” of the district, thus showing a lack of “commitment” to the organization they are employed by.

It’s [superintendent turnover] akin to a CEO leaving a company midstream. The superintendent typically is both the day-to-day person who understands the district but also politically understands the district, and to have that vacuum, I think it’s detrimental both to the educational process, it’s detrimental to cabinet, meaning the upper echelon of the administration, as well as building principals, and from a political perspective I personally believe it shows that there’s a lack of commitment of moving a district forward. (Support Staff B)

Inside politics. In contrast to the “outside” politics discussed above, participants also identified perceived influences of internal or “inside” politics within the district related to positions and gender.

Politics related to position:

I don’t work in the administration, but I think that if people are good with the superintendents who are in the administration, they probably have more pull than what other people would like internal politics. (Teacher A)

Politics related to gender:

... I don’t know how to say this in a politically correct way: It’s a man’s world in this district... It’s scary because I don’t remember the high school having—I think all the administrators are males, so how are females are getting any perspective in? Generally, elementary will have the women, and our middle school has the men. Secondary has the men, so it’s—people see this, and they see that what’s accepted one place with one administrator would not fly with somebody else, and if somebody’s speaking to you in one way, it wouldn’t be okay, and personally I’ve experienced where I’ve witnessed or saw something that I was like, “Wait a second. If I was a teacher and said that, I am a teacher and I had said that, you’d have me in a “Loudermill” (due process hearing),” but this man can say it and he’s still working. It’s not comforting right now. I hope it changes, I just... It’ll change. (Teacher B)

Approximately 50% of support staff was not as concerned as the other staff groups interviewed with the political connections to frequent superintendent turnover and the influence on culture in the district. As seen in the quote by Support Staff B above,

believed that the intersection of politics and the superintendency was “detrimental” to education in the district, was one exception and marked a contrast to the administrators by reflecting on the commitment of the district to strategically move forward.

I think it’s detrimental both to educational process, it’s detrimental to cabinet, meaning the upper echelon of the administration as well as building principals, and from a political perspective I personally believe it shows that there’s a lack of commitment of moving a district forward. (Support Staff B)

Support Staff D took this a step further and felt that local politics were the “main” influence on the superintendency and thus the district culture. This respondent felt that because the superintendents were “temporary” that they succumbed to local political pressures so they could retain their position through political connections. Support Staff D made another point, that superintendents should not rest upon that belief, as it has not helped any of the other superintendents in the past nine years stay any longer than those who proceeded them.

I think for the most part, local politics is the main influence on the culture, especially with the high turnover. The main influence is local, we are powerful here and can make or break anyone in the township. Then you have your state politics depending on what laws they’re passing and what they’re taking out from under us. Then you obviously go federal for the same reason. (Support Staff D)

Mayor. In the district profiled, there are frequent references to the locally elected mayor and his perceived influence in the township and the school district on hiring, local laws and mandates passed and large land deals. However, within the interviews, only three of the fourteen participants (one administrator, one principal and one support staff member) identified the mayor as a noteworthy factor that influences the frequent turnover of superintendents, leading one to believe the influence of the mayor on district dealings may be more “urban legend” than rooted in the actual lived experiences of district staff.

The mayor has board members that he talks to on how to vote on certain issues,

and that I think we suffer as the community and in our culture because the original intent of the board member running was to do something good and noble, and then I think it gets tainted when a phone call is made and he or she is told to vote a certain way on a certain issue. That's when I think it gets a little seedy and a little tough to deal with. (Administrator B)

I think you obviously have a school board/mayor who I would assume in every township and city, even areas where it's sort of a combination of two or three different townships, you have mayors or politicians who elect those school board officials through votes. I think there is always going to be a political reinforcement of the elected positions to influence the schools in some form or fashion to accomplish goals such as taxes and revenue. (Principal B)

I would say our mayor would be an influence, things of that nature-he knows board members, who vote on the superintendent. (Support Staff C)

School Board. Research indicates that often superintendent relationships can be a cause of frequent superintendent turnover, thus also influencing the culture of the district. The superintendent of schools must manage a number of conflicting influences that sometimes lead to disputes with school board members (Carter and Cunningham, 1997; Cuban, 1988).

Approximately half (6/14) of the respondents mentioned the local school board as influential. These participants included an administrator, two principals, one teacher and two support staff, indicating that administrators and support staff are more likely to identify this as an area of influence; the majority of teachers (5/6) did not. This is an interesting finding, as many teachers in the district frequently discuss the school board's involvement in things that impact the classroom, but this did not translate to their view of the district culture as a whole in the interviews.

People talk to board members when they're at Walmart about issues or if they're at a restaurant that evening. So, from that standpoint it affects you because, for instance, you had an issue where someone didn't get paid, and you didn't get the information fast enough in order to get someone paid. People in this district will think nothing of not calling the superintendent first but calling the mayor, and then the mayor will make a phone call. That impacts the culture and me and my

staff because policy has to be set and applied for everyone, not just for the favored few. (Administrator A)

I just think that the leadership from the superintendent's position is so vital, and I think it's been watered down because the strength of school boards. That's across the country. They've made it so superintendents are temporary help and that really impacts school districts because people don't take the position seriously. That's the challenges for a superintendent. (Principal A)

I know that seems like a very strong statement, but the logistics of it is, unfortunately, it becomes a five to four vote very quickly in their careers, and I think there is unfortunately a strong political current on every school board that I seem to observe in my career that superintendents, somewhat, they come up against a wall and within the first two years. It becomes a superintendent's recommendations against the school board recommendations. At some point, one side wins, and one side loses, and usually the superintendent moves on. (Principal B)

A single teacher in the group identified school boards as an influential factor:

I mean the board members have a huge say in the community. We're a small community, so we voice our opinion, which is good, I think, to have that parental involvement in the board, but sometimes I think that they don't understand a teacher's perspective, so they don't really see what's happening in the classrooms or our culture when they're giving their opinion. (Teacher A)

One support staff member sums up this relationship as follows:

Basically that there's no continuity in the direction of the district due to the high superintendent turnover, which is what we have seen over time. A) You don't have a leader, and B) you don't have that liaison with the board who can promulgate change and share that change with the board and convince the board that's the right direction to go. You run the risk of the board running the school district, and that is not the intent of an elected official. (Support Staff B)

Community. Of the interview participants, 9/14 identified the community as an influential factor, with the majority of this representation found in the support staff, with 3/4 members of that group mentioning this area.

One administrator felt the superintendent and board were influenced by the community and that as a result there was "micromanagement of the district" (and funding) by the board, which also influenced the superintendent turnover's impact on

culture, as newcomers had adjust to the board and community personalities to try to achieve longevity, and accomplish district goals.

I think a lot of that has to do with our community, of where we are. We're constantly in this mind set of "Don't increase takes because that's what all the board members run on." Unfortunately, that's not sustainable given the culture and climate we're in, given increased pension obligations as well as health care, special ed. resources. We've tried to keep spending flat, but I think the culture has been more of micromanagement by the board, and I'm not sure how the superintendents handle that. If they, 'cause obviously we all work for the board directly or indirectly, but I think that's one of the things we've been fortunate that we've had reserves put away for the stormy financial times from a prior business manager, but I still think it's always about "Don't raise taxes, don't raise taxes, don't raise taxes," and I just think you can't live that way. (Administrator A)

Administrator B looked at the community from a different lens, believing the constant turnover influenced the culture by creating staff with no connection and buy-in to the district because of their living locations in other townships and a lack of leadership demanding more than mediocrity from staff.

With lack of consistent leadership, I think our community, and the way the schools are viewed in the community, the interaction with the community, I think, impacts the culture. Right now, there's a huge culture of, "XXXX SD pays me a lot of money, but I don't live here and these kids are 'less than' and they should be thankful I'm gracing them with my presence." I think that has a huge impact on the culture of our schools, not addressed because of the constant change in superintendents. (Administrator B)

Teacher C reiterated this stance, describing the district culture as "very negative" in relation to the frequent turnover. However, in contrast to other staff interviewed, this teacher did not feel the community or students even knew that frequent superintendent turnover was an issue, as they may not know who the superintendent is, or may not even care.

I think there's a negative cultural change in the schools (with frequent turnover). It has influenced our schools negatively. It's very negative. From staff members, as you talk to parents and even if you talk to students, because they really don't know with all these changes. Talking to high school students who I've formally

had as middle school students, they continually are telling me, “Wow, this changed. Who’s our superintendent?” This change has affected us. I think it’s the community gets confused with turnover, how the community views the school district, and the changes in the school district, and then is so used to it they don’t care. (Teacher C)

Support Staff A and C felt that there were “hidden agendas and promises” within the community that impact the culture through the sitting superintendents, as well as their “friends” and their interactions with the community.

The community influences through friendships with staff and hidden agendas and promises, which impact the culture. (Support Staff A)

Friendship probably would be your biggest influence in how people know each other, and the district seems to be a small circle of workers who all know someone from somewhere, which impacts the culture and what the superintendent can do, as they [superintendent] are powerful. (Support Staff C)

It was suggested that there are also “power influences” in the community that go awry with frequent superintendent turnover, thus impacting the district culture when no one is in charge to stop it.

Everybody has their own idea of how things should be run. Everybody has a different type of power influence, if you will. That may be good or bad, positive or a detriment, but yeah, for the same reasons, and it runs amok when superintendents come and go and it influences the district culture negatively when no one is in charge consistently. (Support Staff B)

Union. The teacher’s union is a powerful force in the district and is often said to have the “Cadillac Teachers Contract” of the entire county, which is considered quite “teacher friendly.” This is often a topic of conversation amongst administrators who must deal with frequent grievances filed based on perceived “violations” of contractual language. However, despite the union’s frequent mention in district conversations, only three of the fourteen participants (two administrators and one member of support staff) mentioned the union as an influential factor, indicating this may not have as much “real

influence” as “perceived” and discussed frequently by some staff, chiefly the administrators in this study. Participants suggested that the superintendent needed to gain control of the actions of the union but may be afraid to do so, as “taking them on” may limit their tenure.

Because that job does have tentacles to a lot of different groups and they can make or break you depending on how you handle each one of those groups (school boards/union). I’m not saying that you placate or promise things to certain groups just to get them off your back but, you’re going to have to do business with all of them at some point, and it’s just a matter of time as to which battle you pick to say “This is the first battle I really have to dig in.” (Administrator A)

.... our union and the union leadership over the past few years has been one of— How do I say this? They grieve everything that’s even non-grievable. They’re not following the contract. They’re trying to make the best space for them as employees, not for what’s best for education or for children. This starts at the top [from the superintendent]. (Administrator B)

Union relationships are in suspect, I think there are times superintendents are afraid of the unions, which means their decisions are not fair. (Support Staff C)

Federal/State Mandates. Federal and state mandates and the difficulty in implementing them at the district level are frequently discussed in meetings with administrators, principals and teachers. However only three of 14 participants (one teacher and two support staff mentioned this area as influential), which was surprising, as support staff meetings typically do not mention this area as frequently as the other participant groups of administrators, principals and teachers.

I guess, of course, the mandates that are put upon us by the government, and by the Department of Education, can set the tone a lot. I think there’s been a lot of changes and expectations for administrators and teachers on down the line in the past couple years. I think it can set a tone a little bit of feeling overwhelmed, [Contributing to frequent superintendent turnover, and a negative influence on the district culture.] (Teacher F)

Obviously, there are state mandates, there’s federal mandates, educational mandates, political mandates, political agendas, but you’ll always have that, and personal agendas too. It’s not just political that impacts our culture when the

superintendent comes in and out. (Support Staff B)

Theme 3: Culture - The Tree of Life

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” - Marcus Garvey

Culture arose as both an independent theme and a topic that was interwoven within and amongst other themes identified in all areas. Specific to culture, several subthemes emerged, including morale, conflict, motivation, instability and turnover, which related to participants' experiences and perceptions of the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture in the district. All participants felt that frequent superintendent turnover had a negative influence on the culture of the district, which manifested in a myriad of ways and experiences. Staff in all identified positions expressed a sense of frustration at the cultural influences resulting from frequent superintendent turnover and identified the results on district culture over a period of time and to the present day. When the superintendent does not align his/her leadership style and views to the existing district culture, this can result in turnover in the superintendent position (Foster, 1986).

Morale. Morale, as it related to culture in the district, was mentioned by 13/14 participants. Participants indicated that morale, as an extension of the district culture, had been negatively influenced by the frequent superintendent turnover in the district. There is evidence that school culture and morale can have a positive influence on pupil outcomes (Griffith, 1956, as quoted in Miller, 1981). Therefore, the negative influence that frequent superintendent turnover has had upon the district culture through staff morale could have a very real impact on the district's students.

Additionally, superintendent turnover has influenced culture and morale through staff feelings of resentment, navigation of obstacles, levels of happiness and an experience of “waiting out” the superintendent because staff anticipate the arrival of a new one. This results in negative perceptions of the district and is not conducive to teaching, learning or a productive workplace. “Superintendent vacancies can create uneasiness, angst trepidation and uncertainty, and dwindling morale for staff members and can impact stakeholder perceptions of the school district” (Alsbury, 2008, as cited in Grissom and Anderson, 2012, p.12).

Favoritism was mentioned as influencing morale and creating resentment, which influences the district culture as a superintendent’s “open-door policies” may not really be open door in practice.

I think when you start having people treated differently is when you’re going to have resentment and problems that are going to fester because everyone’s like, “No matter what I do, no matter what I say, no matter what I try to develop—something new, a new plan—it’s not going to be listened to because I’m not in the favored category, which impacts moral and district culture. I don’t have carte blanche to just walk in with many superintendents who come and go. There might be an open-door policy, but that does not necessarily mean that people will listen when you make that move to make your statement. (Administrator A)

Turnover was believed to negatively influence morale through obstacles created by the lack of a common culture and limits placed on personal happiness, but participants voiced hope that it will one day get better.

As an administrator, I felt turnover more impacts morale because you try to professionally develop and grow teachers and grow programs and resources and mindsets around teaching. You run into all these obstacles because there is no common culture, community or consistency. (Administrator B)

No one knows what to expect, and we are just waiting for the next superintendent to arrive in the hope it [morale and culture] gets better. (Principal A)

The district culture impacts me personally—I believe that district culture impacts

me personally because my job is my life. If I don't enjoy coming to work today, I'm not personally going to be a happy individual. (Support Staff A)

Unfortunately, in my opinion, superintendent turnover is not a positive way of implementing the culture, which makes our job as building-level administration up to the superintendent, the administration leadership, extremely difficult, and we're on our own to enforce what would you call "moral and ethical values" that are aligned with what we're supposed to be doing for a living with educators and impacts the morale of the administrators who feel like they are holding the bag. (Principal B)

Teachers and support staff seemed disturbed by the impact on morale as a result of the superintendent turnover's influence on culture, which manifesting in the dropping of programs like the Growth Mindset initiative (belief that abilities can be developed through hard work and dedication), as well as staff apathy, staff defeat, limitations to personal happiness and unmet staff expectations.

I know they're (staff) not happy with the turnover rate of superintendents (and the influence on district culture) over time. It's very frustrating. We feel like we get our feedback with one superintendent, and we start working toward their goals and initiatives, and then it changes again, so it's kind of frustrating because we feel like we're working on one thing. We work on the Growth Mindset, for example, and then it's kind of taking a back burner, and now we're going to be starting new initiatives, so it's very frustrating when we talk about it. (Teacher A)

Morale is present in the sense of apathy. We feel like they will leave so why does it matter? (Teacher B)

In all of my teaching, I feel morale is at the lowest it's ever been. I feel that in general, the mood among teachers is that of defeat. (Teacher D)

The turnover has been hard on teachers, and the culture has impacted the morale. No one knows what to expect, or is waiting for a new superintendent to come. (Teacher F)

The district culture impacts me personally because my job is my life. If I don't enjoy coming to work today, I'm not personally going to be a happy individual. (Support Staff A)

We basically do because he's the boss. Basically, the way he wants things to run, that's how it's going to run. It may be completely different if the person that was here before him, which impacts the culture and morale. (Support Staff C)

Conflict. Conflict was identified by 9/14 participants during the interviews as something that influences the culture when experiencing frequent superintendent turnover in the district. This included instances described by staff as “letting people get away with things,” open hostility and other instances that illustrated conflict within the organization from the participants’ experiences.

We have a tendency of, in this district, of letting certain people get away with certain things where other people are held to the fire, which causes conflict.
(Administrator A)

Hostility was identified as an area of conflict by staff who felt they were treated differently, jockeying for positions at all levels of the organization.

Current culture is there’s hostility due to frequent turnover. There is back-biting. There is a lot of “who’s out to get you.” People are stepping on each other to try to secure their spots and their agenda. It’s a lot about adults and very little about kids at this point. You also have an undercurrent of principals who pretend they’re protecting the teachers from district office creating a divide between district office and the teaching staff so that when you are trying to build a culture or a professionally developed teacher, it’s “You don’t have to listen to them. Listen to us.” It keeps six elementaries in different directions. Also creates a level of animosity towards people. You see that all the way from our custodial staff and support staff all the way up to the top layers that there’s no level of respect towards each other, and it’s accepted. It’s actually rewarded most of the time, especially with no one consistent in charge; it impacts the culture of the district.
(Administrator B)

Principal A felt that in the days when the superintendent position was more stable, and the district promoted from within, people were happier and the staff selected for the position of superintendent were a “better fit” for the position in the district because they could understand the inner workings of the district, and thus ensure a more positive culture by meeting the needs of staff in the district.

Changes in superintendents frequently influence culture, often because of internal conflict. We went from a happy-go-lucky place with Dr. XXX, where things

didn't get done to "Yes, we were getting things done," but sometimes we rushed through them, and then on top of it we had close to a hostile work environment, full of conflict. Back in the day when the position was stable, superintendents usually were grown within and knew everything about it and all of the people. People were much happier, with no conflicts in general, which created a more positive culture. (Principal A)

While discussing conflict, teachers and support staff appeared more calm and rational in contrast to the administrators and principals, who were more animated and louder in their voice tone and inflections. Nonetheless, teachers and support staff still felt impacted, although not as passionately as the others, by nitpickers, internal strife and other influences described below:

Yeah, I think you have some people that, just personality, like to cause conflict. It doesn't matter what you do for them, they like to nitpick and find conflict. I also think you have the people that can subdue them, if they have that—What's the word I'm looking for? The backing, the belief in what they're doing, that strong work ethic, they can subside that small group. I always think you have that group of naysayers, and I think that's anywhere, but with superintendent turnover and no vision, it is worse. (Teacher E)

One of the things that surprised me honestly when I came into this profession was how teachers and administrators you would think from the outside are being embraced to the profession, that everybody is working together as a team. That's how it's supposed to be. Then, you get into a district, and you start to see a sort of a "us-against-them" mentality, which is really sad and worse when there is high turnover that affects the culture. (Teacher F)

It didn't impact me at all for a while, until some folks in their relationships changed how people operate, because of people being allowed to do what they want. If strong leadership stayed in place, this may not happen, which impacts culture. (Support Staff C)

It [turnover/culture] does impact the district. You have so many other influences, it does impact a decision. A little birdy in your head might tell you one thing, you want to do it this way, but the birdy on the other side is telling you that you better not because it's going to come back and bite you because of the influences over here, whether it be politics, whether it be a headstrong individual in power on both ends. (Support Staff D)

Motivation. Motivation was identified in 10/14 participant interviews as something that greatly affected the culture of the district related to the frequent superintendent turnover. Some staff mentioned being motivated to “get rid of or wait out the superintendent” so they cannot be held accountable.

As an administrator, my peers, some would say that they like it because they get rid of the superintendents they don’t like and then, depending on the superintendents who come in, they find someone that lets’ them get away with things and do their own thing, which then further divides the general direction or vision of the district. (Administrator B)

Viewpoints on motivation amongst teachers varied, with some trying to remain positive no matter what and others, who have become resigned to a negative feeling of motivation due to the turnover in leadership, feeling overwhelmed, not appreciated and overworked.

Some teachers are positive still. Some—You always have some teachers that are just constantly talking about the negatives. I think that we’re [staff]trying to be supportive with the administration and with the superintendent and what they would like to see. We want to see progress in the district, so we’re trying to remain positive. (Teacher A)

People feel overwhelmed. People are not as positive as they used to be. I’ve been here 21 years. From when I started to now, I think it’s sometimes hard for people to come to work, because not knowing what they’re going to face, and they really feel there is no leadership right now. (Teacher C)

Superintendent turnover and the impact on culture has affected motivation. Again, I go back to feeling valued, appreciated. I’m a type of teacher who will work 24/7, no doubt, hands down, weekends, nights, no problem. You do get to a point where you start to think to yourself, and I’ve found that this year, “Why am I doing it? What is the goal?” If I’m killing myself, and it’s still not enough, why am I doing it? (Teacher D)

Despite the turnover and the negative impact on culture, every day it’s about what can I do for kids, and that is my motivation, despite all the constant changes. (Teacher E)

Support staff resoundingly identified motivation as an influence on the district culture as a result of the succession of superintendents. Much like the teachers, there were support staff who vowed to keep a positive outlook even when surrounded by others who did not, and there were those who questioned motivation levels after the continuous movement of superintendents influenced district culture.

Most people look at the superior of a district or a superintendent and base opinions on actions that person takes, so they respond to the motives of the superintendent, which impacts the culture...After so many administrators coming and going, the current culture of the district is, "Who cares? It doesn't matter. Who cares? We should do whatever we want because we have the ability to do so because we won't be penalized otherwise." I will always do my job because I love it and I am dedicated, but when many don't care, it makes it hard to remain that way. (Support Staff A)

Some staff, while acknowledging that there were negative influences related to the turnover and staff motivation, also noted that these prevented them from doing their job to the best of their ability.

Despite the cultural changes, invariably we have to do our job regardless. Invariably, we have to follow what our superiors ask us to do without fail. I mean, we can obviously voice our opinion and see if we can convince those individuals of a different way, different strategy to go, but yes...The negative culture created through a lot of superintendent turnover is an impact on staff motivation. (Support Staff B)

However, others acknowledged the effect on their motivation level, as they questioned their level of dedication to an organization that cannot keep leaders in the top position.

What level of dedication am I going to put towards my efforts? Am I going to be supported in what I do or what I don't do? When they come and go, there is no buy-in to what they are selling, which impacts the culture in the long run. (Support Staff C)

People feel like, "Here we go again. Another superintendent. Another person in charge. Another learning the way they handle things," and that can take a year

before you learn how they [superintendents] handle it. (Support Staff D)

Instability. The instability in the district created by frequent superintendent turnover and its related influence on culture was identified by 10/14 interview participants (1 administrator, 2 principals, 4 teachers and 3 support staff). This represents a majority of staff who gave specific descriptions of instability in the district that related to the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district.

One staff member felt there were both hidden and unhidden influences that went uncovered by the revolving superintendents that got “lost in the shuffle.”

Culturally, there are hidden or unhidden influences within us, and I think it’s true in a lot of districts it’s “Well, we’ve always done it that way,” and no one really takes the time, especially if you have a situation where you’re transitioning people out of positions and into positions. Things kind of get lost in the shuffle, so, therefore, well, we’ve always done it this way. Okay, we’ll continue to do it that way until we find the time to actually analyze it and figure out if the current way we’re doing it is the right way and the best way. I think what happens is it just kind of continues to happen, and then it becomes past practice, and then it’s hard to get rid of that culture, get rid of it out of the culture. It becomes ingrained and now people are “We’ve been doing it this way for twenty years, why do we have to change now?” I think that’s when you get into a dangerous mindset, when you start doing things like that. (Administrator A)

Other staff described district culture as plagued by instability and noted feeling that the “ground is moving out from under them” when they are not supported or do not understand the district visions implemented by the new superintendents, which has resulted in apathy and fear by some staff because they do not know what to expect from the superintendents.

My peers are teachers at times, so when I was a teacher here my peers there would say they constantly feel like the ground is moving out from under them. They don’t feel supported or secure. They don’t know what the right thing to do is. They can’t keep up with the changing visions, and it significantly impacts them in the classroom. (Administrator B)

I think those of us who are in leadership positions are very disappointed in the sense that a superintendent doesn't stay and have an opportunity to impact the culture and the goals of moving forward in positive ways because we're all left still facing those problems, recognizing them, admiring them, revealing them, and unfortunately not being able to do much about them. (Principal B)

We had the one big thing was The Growth Mindset, and we worked a lot with that. I feel that has gone to the back burner now that we have a new superintendent. I haven't really seen much with XXXX so far as to what initiatives he wants to see rolled out, so I guess it's kind of now we're just hanging and waiting. (Teacher A)

I guess apathy, and instability, is the result of frequent turnover, like "What's it matter anyway?" It's gonna be gone. It was said best to, I want to say, the third superintendent, and he didn't like that I said it. I said, "You're temporary help. We're here for the duration. You're only gonna be here for a couple of years. Just listen to what we have to say 'cause we stay and we don't let things get done before somebody else comes in and changes them." We don't see the long-term effects of anything 'cause that office is always changing. (Teacher B)

Also, with each new superintendent we've had after my first one that was here, new programs were always being put in to the ... classrooms rooms and grade levels, and they were quickly changed. In addition to the high turnover rate with the superintendents, we have a high program turnover instead of giving the programs a chance. That also affects culture because we never know if we're going to be doing that. (Teacher C)

With [superintendent turnover] impacts on culture, some get too much power because the rest of the people don't feel validated or strong to stand up to that; they can infuse that negativity, and it can spread. (Teacher E)

A sense of apathy leads to the instability, I think, among people, because we have so much turnover that after a while people seem to become very apathetic. I think honestly maybe not quite work as hard because they're just so tired of all the change and "We did that 10 years ago; now they want this." It's the constant change, and it really, I think, becomes disheartening to people. They want to keep striving and moving forward and making things better, and then they kind of don't know what these new expectations are, etc. (Teacher F)

The changes in culture related to the turnover over a period of time with several superintendents is: The largest difference [is instability] in a culture of fear to now lack thereof—a culture in which you could pretty much do whatever you want to a culture where people were afraid to even vocalize their own opinions and now no one knows where they stand. (Support Staff A)

Turnover. The turnover and its related influence on culture was identified by 10/14 interview participants. Recurring in the theme of turnover was the negative influence the staff felt superintendent turnover had upon the culture of the district. All staff positions were in agreement that there was a negative influence and connection between the two, as evidenced by the statements below:

The constant turnover has impacted the culture greatly. (Administrator B)

You're temporary help. We're here for the duration. You're only gonna be here for a couple of years. (Teacher B)

Turnover has caused great issues in culture, with constant change and unsettled staff, which trickles to students. (Teacher C)

Turnover has a negative impact on culture in the district. (Teacher E)

One support staff member equated the newness of the position as a “joyful experience” and that “staying” would equate to a sense of caring and reliability from the superintendent. This participant mentioned that one recent superintendent who he perceived as “caring, reliable and motivated to do the right thing for children” was “politically executed” for his style and ignoring political ties in order to make the right decision. This participant noted that this showed “good deeds are at times punished” and further illustrates the complexities that must be navigated by a superintendent so there is not a large personal cost when making decisions that are “morally” right.

Depending on which of the following depends on what happens: I believe leaving can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on that person's stay in that district. Coming is usually a joyful experience because it's a new transition for the most part. When someone stays, you feel a sense of kind of caring and someone who is reliable and can be depended on for a district if they are good any staying because they choose to. However, look at our prior superintendent—he was politically executed for both his leadership style and his uncovering of wrong-doing by district staff and because of the community, political ties in the community, when he made decisions based on the best interest of the district and the kids we serve. He paid the price for it—for being ethical—and now he is no

longer in the district... We [staff] describe the constant turnover as frustrating. That's the largest word that is used. It's also complicated, and frustrating is the best word. (Support Staff A)

Additionally, consistency was mentioned in relation to turnover, as interviewed staff felt that a lack of consistency in leadership influenced culture, impacting their ability to do their job by making it "impossible."

It's hard to have consistency. It makes the consistency of the district and culture different or difficult with so much turnover. (Support Staff C)

With high turnover, it is frustrating and impacts culture. Because, I want to be consistent in how I do my job, and I want to be consistent across the board, but their influence is affecting that, and you can't be consistent. It's impossible. (Support Staff D)

Theme 4: Outcomes - "You Are Just Temporary Help; Will You Stay or Will You Go?"

State of the district. All interview participants (14/14) from all staffing groups felt the need to weigh in on the current "state of the district" as it related to the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district. Overwhelmingly, the participants characterized the culture as being influenced negatively by the frequent superintendent turnover in the district and noted its resulting impacts through all the theme areas discussed.

After examining the resulting themes and sub-themes, certain perceptions from the interview participants appeared prevalent, including comments about the current state of the district in comparison to perceived "happier and less stressful times during periods of superintendent tenures that were longer in length."

One staff member described the arrival of a new superintendent as a “life cycle” of “getting to know you” and forming alliances, and ultimately favors, as the new arrival tries to juggle the resources and demands of the job.

I think when a new superintendent comes in there’s like a life cycle that happens. There’s going to be that “getting-to-know-you” situation where they go to every school and they look at every department and get a feel for what they do, and then there’s always that moment where everyone wants to start asking the superintendent for favors to see where they stand and if they can get more books or money or more whatever. That superintendent then has to manage resources of what we have, as opposed to what his plans are, and try to manage it to that degree without letting everyone get—we call it “the Christmas tree effect.” Santa Clause, everybody is coming to see if they can get a gift, and the superintendent has to make that determination as to who’s going to get and who’s not. I think the other part of the life cycle is “When’s the first battle going to come?” Is it going to come with the board? Is it going to come with the teacher’s union? Is it going to come with a parent? Is it going to come with any of the community members? (Administrator A)

Most staff appeared suspicious of new superintendents and view their arrival as negative, and thus wait for them to “go away.”

Negatively, we can say that they can sit back and allow people to do what they’re doing, be indecisive, be of the mindset of “If I ignore it, it’ll go away.” That can negatively impact the culture. (Administrator B)

Many staff spoke to prior superintendents that were “in the seat” more than 10 years ago and that over time, with the average tenure of the superintendents in the district having dropped from 13.2 years to 3.2, they felt there currently was “no stability,” “frustration,” “negativity” and “a lack of vision,” and that this resulted in “a lack of respect by staff for the position” of top district leader.

Superintendents, to have longevity, could be more open in terms of the decision-making process. I understand that everybody has—they want to keep things close to the vest, so to speak, but there are times where they need to be a little bit more open. I think there needs to be more of a clear plan as to where we’re going. (Principal A)

Well, somewhere in my past education, I remember it used to be a superintendent

could stay 15, 20 years, and now I believe the superintendent is lucky if he lasts almost two years out of the 3-to-5-year contract, so in my opinion, it has impacted the districts in a negative way because there's no stability and there's no individual that actually gets to complete their term and complete any of the goals that they set out doing from their first year. (Principal B)

With the constant turnover, it gets to be frustrating every once in a while—all the negative comments with everyone thinking they don't have to follow up because the superintendent will leave and we will quickly have a new one. There is not a lot of respect for the position. Being the curriculum coordinator as well, I hear a lot from teachers, too, so I take it with a grain of salt because I know they're not coming at me personally, but hearing a lot of the negative comments we hear can sometimes get to you, but you just can't let it get to you. Got to stay positive. (Teacher A)

We are in a state of confusion with no clear vision, but we do what we need to for our students. (Teacher C)

Negative impressions continued throughout the interviews as staff felt defeated and unappreciated. They also noted suffering from the high turnover of administrators, which results in staff having a “Who cares?” attitude that influences the culture daily, as staff feel the district will “never move forward,” as evidenced by the quotes below:

I can only speak for this building because this is where I'm at. Again, I think morale is very low. I think that teachers are very frustrated. I can speak personally. I felt defeated this year. I feel that no matter how much I'm doing, it's not enough. I'm not catching up. I'm not staying ahead of the curve whereas previously, I've been very capable of doing that. (Teacher D)

I think a lot of people are feeling a lack of leadership from the top, a lack of visibility. I have some teachers who don't even know who the superintendent is, was or will be—they are so used to the turnover. (Teacher E)

Turnover—I guess it gives an overall sense of instability and unclear expectations because it seems that whenever a new superintendent comes onboard things get reshuffled and people don't know what are the real goals and expectations now of the district. Are we moving forward with what's been in place, or is everything, or many things, going to be changing? What hoops do we all have to jump through now? (Teacher F)

After so many administrators coming and going, the current culture of the district is “Who cares? It doesn't matter. Who cares? We should do whatever we want because we have the ability to do so because we won't be penalized otherwise.” It never used to be like that before. (Support Staff A)

With constant change, we will never move ahead. (Support Staff C)

Superintendent turnover has impacted the culture and the consistency, or lack thereof, in the district. (Support Staff D)

Focus on students' needs. One finding related to a view almost exclusively limited to teachers. Seven participants (1 administrator and 6/6 teachers) discussed a area focus on students' needs. There was a mention of "meeting student needs," notably by all six teachers. This contrasts with administrators, principals and support staff where only one participant amongst these groups mentioned student needs during. This would lead one to believe that those closest to students are most aware of the "purpose" of district operations as they result in student outcomes. It appeared from the sampling that the participants perceivably more removed from students in their daily work were not as acutely aware of this impact, or felt there was none, as it was not mentioned. Teachers at all levels, elementary, middle and high, spoke emphatically and passionately about ensuring that they would never allow the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district to impact their students.

One hundred percent of the teachers interviewed realized or discussed how students' needs were related to the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on district culture. What was clear was the teachers' fierce devotion to ensuring that despite the "chaos" that may exist related to frequent superintendent turnover and its influence on current district culture they would not permit it to filter down to the students. Only one other staff member, an administrator, mentioned "student needs" in their interview, leading one to believe that the further one is from the students in the organization, the less one saw an importance or influence.

In an educational organization devoted to students and their outcomes, it is surprising that only a little over 50% of the respondents would have seen this as an issue or factor that might be influenced. None of the support staff interviewed identified this as an area of focus in their interviews. This may lead one to believe that the further you are in your position from students, the less impact or influence you see upon them.

Alternatively, perhaps those closest to students (teachers) simply refuse to allow any factors (including their personal work life/environment and district culture) to negatively influence the experience of the students who sit before them in the district classrooms on a daily basis. This speaks to the level of professionalism and seriousness the teachers devote to their craft, profession and the students.

In contrast to the teachers, neither of the principals who work with students daily mentioned a focus on student needs. This negates the belief that those who work closest with children identify this as an area of need, as related to this study, and points to a mindset that differs from the teachers' viewpoint, as evidenced by interview excerpts below:

My kids go to school here. I went to school here. So, it is very personal to me, and it is very sad to me to have seen from the time I was a student here to what the culture in our district has become because as much as people don't understand this, it impacts the students. When you talk to the students, they have a very different experience and a very jaded outlook on our schooling system because the teachers share that with them and the principals share that with them. It really bleeds into everything and unfortunately, my kids, that's their school experience. (Administrator B)

I try not to let it [superintendent turnover or the culture] bother me. When I close my doors and I'm working, that's for my students and what works best for my students. I try to keep it just for my classroom and not let everything else interfere with me. (Teacher A)

But the worst part is that we're now used to it [turnover and the impact on district culture] We're doing the same thing over and over again, and nothing's changing,

but the kids are changing, and it's gotten to the point where, sadly, it's showing to the kids in some places, and I don't like it. (Teacher B)

If we're not culturally happy here and that shows to our students, and you want the students to feel safe and happy. I don't let the turnover or the impact on district culture affect me because I'm in charge of my students, so if I don't have what I need I'm going to find what I need. (Teacher C)

I know I've talked to many members of this school, and we've all felt that this year is "I'll do anything for these kids. They are my life." But why are we doing it? Are we fighting or losing battle? Absolutely. It [superintendent turnover and the influence on district culture] can have a huge impact on my job. I have no problem giving up my social life if it means that it's helping these kids. Again, you start to wonder, "Why am I doing it?" (Teacher D)

View of the superintendent position. All 14 of the interview participants shared views on the position of superintendent in the district and the implications of frequent superintendent turnover for district culture.

Staff, like students, want clear directions and expectations from their superintendents, which is compromised when a district is plagued by frequent superintendent turnover.

I think everybody says that everyone takes the direction from the top. If the direction is sound, clear, concise and everyone knows what they're doing and what the goals are, I think everyone's clear on that—whether or not clearly articulated, and you're constantly struggling to figure out where you fit into this big organizational chart, for lack of a better term. I think people are less apt to buy into the program. Every superintendent comes with their own plans. They all come with their own list of ten things that they want to get done in the next whatever years, and things happen, boards change, economic times change, the budget changes, and I think if there's no clear articulation at the top as to how things are going to get handled, how they're going to get—when there's an issue how is it going to get handled? Is it going to get washed under the carpet, you know, thrown under the carpet? (It wasn't like that with longer sup terms.) Or, is it going to be dealt with head on to send a message to other people that may or may not want to try that same path? (Administrator A)

Over time, we have seen that there needs to be a balance between being understanding and holding high expectations and follow through, rather than polar opposites of extreme favoritism and friendships or being on the warpath. We have had any and every style, and we can't move ahead with the constant turnover that

has now impacted the culture to where we are frozen in place and waiting to say “Next,” to see who comes along next, as they all appear temporary. (Administrator B)

The frequency with which the district has placed superintendents has massively influenced the district culture, creating a belief that the top spot is “unnecessary,” temporary, not of value, vacated quickly, and lacks stability.

Again, superintendents are temporary help. (Principal A)

As I said in the beginning, none of those superintendent goals get achieved [when they come and go] and they’re put aside. Then, there’s another person comes in with either similar or different goals, and the game is played once more for two years, or three years. They are considered “temporary help” and we will outlast them. (Principal B)

The superintendent will leave, and we will quickly have a new one. (Teacher A)

He [superintendent] needs to get back to the children. We were there when I came to this district. We were about the kids, and I really want to see us get back to that place. (Teacher D)

We need a clear vision and communication from him to impact the culture, and follow through. (Teacher E)

I feel like it [constant superintendent turnover] doesn’t allow for any stability or reliability. (Support Staff A)

They have to stay, be strong and decisive to make change matter. (Support Staff C)

Clearly, the interviewed staff have identified the position as so disposable that it has become “comical.” Support Staff A shared that there are district staff members who actually place bets on how long the newest superintendents will stay in the district.

People think, “Here we go again.” It just becomes that revolving door, and it almost becomes comical. (Support Staff D)

“Temporary help.” Another finding uncovered in the interviews was the sub-theme that captures the overall feeling and classification that most staff used to describe

the position in the district: “temporary help.” Of the participants interviewed, 12/14 indicated in some way during their interviews that the perception of all staff after the frequent superintendent turnover over the past nine years, in comparison to the years prior that were more stable, is that the position of superintendent is now considered unstable and not a viable force for change in the district at the instructional or cultural level.

Participants indicated that the succession of recent superintendents had not created any long-lasting or impactful initiatives but rather has created chaos within the culture of the district. Staff identified cultural influences that resulted in perceptions of widespread dysfunction and negativity as a result of superintendent turnover, including inside and outside influences, culture, staff morale, conflict, and motivation.

The influence of frequent superintendent turnover on district culture has allowed for the creation of an environment fraught with instability. This makes it quite difficult for a new superintendent to navigate all stakeholder groups, implement new initiatives and establish long-term trust. Participant interviews revealed the consistent theme of the superintendent position being classified as “temporary help,” which will cripple and hinder future superintendents from moving the district forward until the cultural implications of this widespread belief are addressed by the superintendent and district staff collectively. It has been stated that for a district to undergo “successful reform, a minimum of five years of consistency is necessary” (Fullan, 1992., p.19). The average superintendent tenure in this district over the past nine years is 3.2 years, which falls significantly short of Fullan’s recommended 5 years, further reinforcing the staff view of the superintendent as “temporary help.”

We have had any and every style, and we can't move ahead with the constant turnover that has now impacted the culture to where we are frozen in place and waiting to say "Next," to see who comes along next, as they all appear temporary. (Administrator B)

Again, superintendents are temporary help. (Principal A)

They [superintendents] are considered "temporary help," and we will outlast them. (Principal B)

You're temporary help. We're here for the duration. You're only gonna be here for a couple of years. (Teacher B)

They all leave in a short period of time, like temporarily, so you might not think it impacts the culture but it does because so many in and out really says, "You don't matter and don't count because I'll be out and on to the next thing while all of you are left to clean it up and start all over again." (Teacher F)

They [staff] just believe that it's a temporary personnel [superintendent] that's in the position, so they don't feel a need to do anything permanent or make concrete decisions because it's not going to be someone who's going to continue the trend. (Support Staff A)

They all just leave us to clean up their mess and try to figure out the next one and what they want, which means our culture is chaos and gets worse every time they come and go. (Support Staff B)

Coming and going, temporarily, we always get new ones [superintendents] which means the culture is not cohesive, and everyone thinks they can do what they want. (Support Staff C)

People think, "Here we go again." It just becomes that revolving door, and it almost becomes comical...I don't see them [superintendents] as "permanent" but the impact of them leaving is, as it affects us, the organization. If the head honcho doesn't care to stay to have an impact, will anyone else? (Support Staff D)

Summary of the Analysis of the Semi-Structured Interviews

In this chapter, the researcher presented the qualitative data that was collected in semi-structured interviews with 14 members of the profiled district's staff, including administrators, principals, teachers and support staff, to gain the perspectives of staff across all positions and levels of the K-12 suburban district located in the northeastern United States. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of district

staff as they experienced district culture through the frequent turnover of district superintendents.

This chapter discussed the themes that emerged from an analysis of the qualitative data.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded after being uploaded into the software Dedoose, which is used in qualitative research analysis and was purchased independently by the researcher.

The full engagement of the researcher in the processing of the interview transcriptions allowed for accurate and thorough analysis of the data to determine common themes and sub-themes. It also gave the researcher the ability to compare and contrast the experiences of all four groups of district staff (administrators, principals, teachers and support staff) that were interviewed as part of the study. A theme chart (Table 4.1) was created to examine and categorize the themes that arose in each of the participant interviews.

Participant interview excerpts and quotations from the interviews were provided in the analysis above to reveal the participants' voices and lived experiences. The themes provided insight into what these 14 participants believed were influences and priorities for the district in determining and addressing the current culture of the district based on their experience of frequent superintendent turnover and its influences on the district culture.

This analysis chart indicated four major themes related to the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district profiled:

- I. Superintendent Turnover/Change**
 - a. Leadership Style**

- b. **Communication**
 - c. **Vision**
 - d. **Decisions**
 - e. **Relationships**
- II. **Influences**
 - a. **Politics**
 - b. **Mayor**
 - c. **School Board**
 - d. **Community**
 - e. **Union**
 - f. **Federal/State Mandates**
- III. **Culture**
 - a. **Morale**
 - b. **Conflict**
 - c. **Motivation**
 - d. **Instability**
 - e. **Turnover**
- IV. **Outcomes**
 - a. **State of the District**
 - b. **Focus on Students' Needs**
 - c. **View of the Superintendent Position**
 - 1. **"Temporary Help"**

All responses to the primary and secondary research questions were derived through the semi-structured interviews with district staff that held positions of administrators, principals, teachers and support staff. The primary research question (RQ1) related to how the frequent turnover of district superintendents in the district influenced the culture of the district, and the secondary research questions (RQ 2-5) related to how the specific groups of administrators, principals, teachers and support staff describe the implications of frequent superintendent turnover on the district culture. Answers to these questions were reviewed in the profiles of the participant responses during the semi-structured interviews. Responses of the staff groups (administrators, principals, teachers and support staff) during the semi-structured interviews were compared to determine differences and similarities in their responses and relevant themes

that emerged in the analysis. These results will inform my practice as a district administrator and researcher.

The following chapter is a summary of the study. It presents the conclusions and examines the results of the research and data analysis. Additionally, Chapter V specifically speaks to how the study conclusions may inform district protocols, interactions with staff, future practice decisions and possible future research directions.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This qualitative ethnographic cross-case analysis case study that examined the link between frequent superintendent turnover and its influence on district culture. The study findings indicated that external and internal situations influenced district culture due to frequent superintendent turnover. The literature suggests that nationally, the average superintendent tenure is 3.2 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). Previous studies have examined superintendent turnover and its relationships with school boards (Bundy, 2003) or student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006; Parker-Chenaille, 2012; Shelton, 2010), but little research was available that had examined the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a district. Superintendent turnover is thus lacking a well-developed research foundation (Natkin et al., 2002).

Summary of Findings and their Interpretation

The results of the current study and its findings related to the purpose of the research (RQ 1 - Has frequent turnover of superintendents influenced the culture of the district?) further authenticate the need to gain greater understanding of the ways in which

frequent superintendent turnover influences the culture of a district, in both hidden and unhidden ways, complicating the complex roles of superintendents and their interactions with the larger community, including school boards, district stakeholders, local politicians and community groups.

Frequent superintendent turnover has a negative influence on the culture of a district. Staff at all levels of the organization expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency of superintendent turnover. They expressed concern regarding its influences on the district culture, as the perceptions of staff indicated the growth of the district was stymied, its vision was compromised and outside influences had too far a reach into district operations, which resulted in a conflict-ridden “unstable” district with low staff morale and where the superintendent is viewed as nothing more than “temporary help.” Often, turnover results in superintendents who are reluctant to tackle necessary tasks or major reform efforts in the interests of self-preservation, which the leads to district staff taking a “hands-off, wait-and-see” approach to the superintendent’s mission, directives and initiatives (Natkin, 2002).

The primary conclusion of the interview data in this research study is that frequent superintendent turnover has influenced the district culture and has do so negatively. Leadership longevity and stability ensures the long-term success of a district. The importance of the superintendent’s role in the district, and the consequences of superintendents’ exits, make understanding factors that drive superintendent turnover a crucial topic for understanding (Natkin et al., 2002).

The findings regarding secondary research questions 2-5 further indicated that staff at multiple levels (administrators, principals, teachers and support staff) within the

organization felt the **influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of the district was viewed in a negative light by all staff groups interviewed.**

Overwhelmingly, the interview participants from all staff positions characterized the culture as being influenced negatively by the frequent superintendent turnover.

The personal characteristics of superintendents make an impact and have an influence on the views of staff (Tallerico & Burtsyn, 1996) related to turnover and culture. Staff in all positions most frequently mentioned areas controlled by the superintendent such as leadership style, communication, vision, decisions and relationships (all found in Theme 1).

Communication is key. All interview participants identified communication (or a lack thereof) as one of the largest issues that transcended each of the superintendent appointments over a period of time in the district. Staff felt that frequent superintendent turnover created a culture of infrequent, unclear or non-existent communication across the district within each and every staffing position.

Peterson and Short (2001) argued that superintendents require “interpersonal skills” that bring all stakeholders together to support decisions that affect the district. Because these areas (leadership style, communication, vision, decisions and relationships) are more within the direct control of the superintendent than other areas/themes that emerged in the data, the findings indicate the need to ensure that when superintendent searches are conducted, districts and school boards identify the characteristics that will ensure the best fit for the district, as this will increase the longevity of the appointment, as well as stakeholder satisfaction. Thus, the culture of the district will be influenced more positively.

When examining the data to determine how staff groups described the influence of turnover on the culture of the district, staff responses from all levels were consistent in the frequency of responses related to themes, with most areas receiving 50% or more of respondents in each area (between 7-14 participants). The exception is Theme 2, *Influences - "Power and Politics,"* in which between 3-10 of the total participants related the importance of this theme to superintendent turnover's influence on district culture. For Theme 1 (*Superintendent Change and Turnover*), Theme 3 (*Culture - The Tree of Life*) and Theme 4 (*Outcomes – "You Are Temporary Help; Will You Stay or Will You Go?"*), each identified theme was consistently identified amongst all staff groups as influential, with between 8-14 responses in each identified theme or sub-theme.

Within the strand of Theme 2 - *Influences* was one of the most surprising findings. District discussions at all levels, in official and informal meetings, are typically peppered with the belief that the district is ruled through politics, connections and, at times, local elected officials. The sub-themes within Theme 2 (Politics, Mayor, School Board, Community, Union and Federal and State Mandates) were mentioned by the smallest number of interviewed staff as being influential. This is not to say they are not significant; however, these sub-themes did not appear to be as large a focus in the interviews as in daily conversations in the district, but should not be overlooked as not influential. "District and community characteristics may be a factor by affecting the probability that community members will become discontented with the superintendent and implement their political power to pressure the school board to make changes" (Alsbury, 2003; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970).

Politics are culturally influential in multiple ways, from both outside and inside the organization. The data revealed that participants were acutely aware of both internal and external influences, and the “power and politics” in Theme 2, that can influence district outcomes, culture and the longevity of the superintendency. This is reinforced by the work of Alsbury (2008) who examined the impact of politics and political motives. In the present study, internal and external political influences were reported by participants as negatively influencing district culture. In their responses, participants focused on political influences from both “inside politics,” related to position (favors) and gender (“a man’s world”), and “outside politics,” related to local township political activities, parties and politicians. Staff worried that the superintendent, in a mission of self-preservation and longevity, may be more responsive to the locally elected officials’ “wants” than district stakeholders’ “needs.

Politics and power were viewed differently by different staff groups.

Administrators, principals and support staff reported the most belief in the influential nature of the areas identified within Theme 2, and teachers, in comparison, identified this theme with less frequency. None of the teachers identified the union or the mayor as key areas of influential input, whereas administrators, principals and support staff did so with more frequency. Thus, this finding supports that politics and power, both local and internal (including within the union), were not considered as influential amongst teachers as other themed areas.

Superintendent relationships with school boards are complex. Superintendent relationships with school boards are typically considered to be a decisive element of a superintendent and the length of their tenure (Education Writers Association, n.d.). It is

common for conflict with the school board to cause a superintendent to leave (Rausch, 2001, as cited in Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Allen (1998) observed that superintendents cited “relationships with the board as a second reason for involuntary non-extension of a contract, while board members listed relationships with the superintendent as the major cause (Byrd et.al, 2008., p.3).” Despite these conflicts, Glass and co-researchers (2000) concluded that the school board and superintendent must work in conjunction to unite the school district with the community needs (as cited in Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000).

Superintendents tend to express a frustration of sorts that originates in the board’s micromanaging or interfering in superintendents’ administrative responsibilities (Harvey, 2003). Approximately half of the participants (6/14; one administrator, two principals, one teacher and two support staff) identified the school board as influential on culture in relation to frequent turnover in the district. Only one of six teachers discussed the school board and their influence, indicating that the farther staff are from the daily activities of groups and individuals, like the school board, the less aware they are of the influence that group may have on either the frequent turnover of superintendents or its impact on district culture. However, in addition to that one teacher, both principals, one administrator and one support staff member also acknowledged the influence of the school board and related politics. This reveals the perceived negative influence on district culture, as some felt they are not treated equally, that the position is seen as “temporary” and staff do not take it seriously because the continuity of the direction of the district has been compromised due to the frequent superintendent turnover. This finding supports the notion that “the superintendent of schools must manage a number of conflicting

influences that sometimes lead to disputes with school board members” (Carter and Cunningham, 1997; Cuban, 1988).

Frequent superintendent turnover has created organizational barriers that negatively influence district culture. When examining the data from *Theme 3 - Culture*, the majority of participants (13/14), from all levels of the organization, were in agreement that the culture of the organization was influenced negatively by frequent superintendent turnover in the areas of morale, conflict, motivation, instability and frequent turnover. The loss of a superintendent negatively affects staff morale and satisfaction (Alsbury, 2008).

Culture is an overlooked casualty in the examination of the influence of superintendent turnover. Previous studies have examined the influence of superintendent turnover on student achievement (Hoyle, 2005), school board relationships (Bundy, 2003), politics (Grissom & Anderson, 2012), etc. However, none has examined the one aspect that has an immense and lasting impact on the entire organization and truly defines it: the culture (Peterson & Deal, 2002). In the participant interviews in this study, there was not one positive aspect mentioned related to the frequent superintendent turnover and its influence on district culture. Every staff member group interviewed viewed the continuous turnover as something to “survive,” and even noted playing a “waiting game” for the next superintendent to arrive, further eroding the district culture cycle after cycle as the district rotates through “temporary help” placed in the role of superintendent.

Student needs were viewed differently by different staff groups. In an educational organization designed to focus on students, only 7/14, or 50%, of the

interview participants mentioned “student needs” as an area of focus. These respondents included all six of the teachers (100% of teachers interviewed) and one district administrator, indicating that the teachers absolutely believed that they would do whatever is necessary to support students despite the negative influences they felt the frequent superintendent turnover had on district culture.

“Hidden factors” hinder district achievement (Peterson & Deal, 2002). It appeared that the staff more removed from the classroom, such as principals, administrators and support staff did not consider the needs of the students of the district in their assessment of the cultural influence of superintendent turnover, as only one administrator mentioned this in their interview.

Staff look at the district superintendent as “temporary help.” Staff believed that the superintendent position in the district operated on a “revolving door” and superintendents were seen as “temporary help” that had no real positive impact on the organization and its culture. Twelve of the fourteen participants interviewed, or approximately 85% of respondents, characterized the superintendent as “temporary help.” “With chronic turnover come expectations that turnover is inevitable, making the superintendent turnover story one of short-term focus with insufficient investment in long-range vision and infrastructure” (Buchanan, 2006).as cited in Grisson & Anderson, 2012. p.2).

The frequent turnover of superintendents can also have a negative effect on an incoming superintendent, as was evident in staff interviews with staff not buying into new initiatives or protocols from the incoming superintendent (Cooper et al., 2000; Hoyle et al., 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The success of the school district is dependent on

the long-term continuity in the seat of school superintendent, which is therefore important in school leadership and organizational management (Council of Urban Boards of Education, 2001).

Research shows that amongst superintendents who stay longer than five years in a district, the average tenure in that post is over ten years (Fullan, 2008). Results of this study support the findings of others (Natkin et al., 2002; Glass et al., 2000) that superintendent turnover has a negative influence on an district. Increasing the longevity of the tenure of the superintendent could therefore conceivably have a resulting positive influence on the culture of the district that was studied.

A new cultural norm in the district appears to be the “waiting out” of the succession of superintendents that frequently turnover. The position of superintendent has very little security and is one in which the individual in the post is under a great deal of scrutiny. In addition to federal, state and local mandates that must be complied with, superintendents must address expectations of the community, the school board and stakeholders, while also ensuring district culture is not overlooked. Research has revealed that the “success or failure of superintendents’ length of tenure is a subject that is ambiguous and not thoroughly researched” (Hoyle, et al. 2005 p.2). “Despite the length of tenure, one thing is certain, for good or bad, the system will survive the superintendent” (Garner, 1990 p. 12). Staff felt they would “outlast” the current superintendent. If multiple staff refuse to implement the vision, mission, programs or initiatives established by new superintendents, a vicious cycle ensues, where staff feels there is no direction and boards feel superintendents are not making progress; thus, the search for a new superintendent begins.

Conclusions

Research on the leadership factors that influence district culture has nationwide implications. Due to a paucity of research on frequent superintendent turnover and its influence on district culture, there may be a need to examine similarities or differences in a variety of districts (urban, suburban and rural) nationwide.

Because research on the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a school district is limited, this study could provide a foundation for further study to understand not just the influence of this turnover on district culture but also the resulting cultural influence on student achievement, staff morale, board relationships and influences and perceptions of leadership.

Additionally, superintendent and principal preparation programs could use the study findings to prepare pre-service principals and superintendents for leadership positions as they examine the connections between leadership, organizational culture and relationships with stakeholders.

Through transparent, open lines of communication, self-refining leadership styles and the establishment of effective relationships and a district vision, superintendents appointed as district leaders must begin to examine and strategically plan to both directly and indirectly tackle the cultural issues resulting from superintendent turnover that have been raised in the study. Opportunities for examining the practice and preparation of superintendents in programs and districts should use the work of Bolman and Deal, to examine their methodological approach to organizational change and learning through use of the four frames to create learning and opportunities to lead organizational and

cultural change. Leaders can reframing district structure in ways that is most productive to the district staff and the districts mission and/or vision carried out by all members of the organization, which ultimately shapes the district culture. “The ability to reframe an experience enriches and broadens a leader’s repertoire... [leaders] are imprisoned only to the extent that their palette of ideas is impoverished” (Bolman & Deal, 1997 p 9).

Organizational culture cannot be perceived as a “casualty” of frequent superintendent turnover in school districts. The district culture is ultimately what contributes to the definition of a healthy educational organization. Interaction between the superintendent and other members of the organization’s leadership, along with both spoken and unspoken influences, rules and standards that impact the behavior of the district’s member through words, gestures and interpersonal relationships, should effectively foster the ability of stakeholders to respond to, connect with and implement the organization’s mission and vision. This should allow the district to become an organization of cultural change agents, ultimately lead by a (hopefully) long-standing and long-serving superintendent that exhibits the ethics, passion, qualities and leadership style that a leader needs to promote a healthy organizational culture.

All staff stakeholder groups, including administrators, principals, teachers and support staff within the district identified the superintendent as “temporary help” and did not believe the position held any value, or perceived limitations to what could be accomplished due to the short lengths of service (Natkin, 2002).

Some staff interviewed spoke of “waiting the superintendent out” (Natkin, 2002) and not following district mandates, or established vision and initiatives of the new superintendent because they “knew they [the superintendent] would be leaving.” This

belief further erodes the culture of the district and makes it much more difficult for an incoming superintendent to establish and maintain their vision and effective communication with all stakeholders in the district moving forward.

Findings from this study showed a correlation with discoveries in earlier studies that reported “social interaction can significantly build trust” (Firestone, 2009) and help to grow or increase morale (Covey, 1992; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Superintendents must recognize the value in examining the district culture and the influence it has on the organization as a whole (Deal & Peterson, 2009), while putting into place action plans that will address how to strategically develop an effective culture.

When new superintendents are frequently arriving, this may contradict or confuse staff regarding leadership initiatives and leadership style (of the new superintendent vs. that of the previous superintendent), which then influences staff morale and the culture of the district. Grissom and Anderson (2012) suggested that the new superintendent must gain an understanding of the “previous leadership style” as there is no quick solution to gain the immediate approval of district staff to the leadership changes that take place in the school district (Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

“Multiple current issues faced by public schools in this country make the position of superintendent a complex seat to fill” (Orr, 2002, as quoted in Byrd, et.al, 2006 p.2). It is imperative that moving forward superintendents who assume the position do not overlook the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district.

The district profiled in the study has experienced great public scrutiny, which has also impacted the district’s culture. Thus, incoming superintendents can address staff morale and the district culture through a systemic effort to interact and build meaningful

relationships and engagement with staff to overcome the previous influence of frequent superintendent turnover (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Jones & Howley, 2009). A superintendent newly appointed to the position must communicate effectively and develop positive, interdependent relationships that ensure staff stakeholders see the value and purpose of the position of superintendent; they must believe that the appointee can move the district forward in a positive direction (Trevino et al., 2008).

This study confirms the researcher's belief that the frequent turnover of superintendents has had a negative influence on the culture of this specific district in multiple areas, including staff morale, relationships, communication, leadership style, outside influences, politics, unions and the larger community. Interviewed staff identified no positive outcomes as a result of frequent superintendent turnover on the district culture. Turnover, coupled with other influences, dictate the tenure of superintendents and the resulting district culture. "People, programs, politics and power seem to cloud and control the fate of superintendents and the superintendency in general" (Gestson, 2009, p.11).

Superintendents must remain in the district long enough to establish relationships, implement their programming, vision and initiatives and influence the district culture in such a way that effective and efficient systems are established and remain, even in their absence, so the district does not suffer if the trend of frequent superintendent turnover continues.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the current study provides worthwhile information regarding the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a district, this research was exploratory and

limited in both the number of participants (14) and that it was conducted in one district.

Suggestions for future research are as follows:

- Conduct a comparative qualitative study using two or more districts.
- Conduct a quantitative study that would involve additional participants.
- Conduct a quantitative study that interviews school board members, superintendents and community members to obtain information on the perceptions of non-school district employees.

Recommendations for Action

While the interpretation of the results from the semi-structured interviews with district staff has resulted in findings that could warrant further study and research, the following recommendations for action should be considered based on this study's findings:

- Incoming superintendent(s) should review the district history of superintendent turnover and the resulting influence on district culture and address action steps in his/her entry plan to the district.
- Factors addressing the stability of the superintendent position in the district should be addressed during the interview and search for superintendent candidates. There should be a contractual clause committing the superintendent to a specified period they will remain in the district.
- Effective plans and methods of communication and assessment of school and district culture and district leadership should be implemented on an annual basis.

- There should be strategic planning by the superintendent and district leadership teams to reestablish cultural norms that will result in positive outcomes for staff, which will have a ripple effect on the organization as a whole.
- Superintendents, superintendents-in-training and local university preparation programs should review and implement data-based indicators of superintendent success, including the “strategic” communications skills needed to ensure they are reaching the district’s goals. This recommendation is critical to the success of future superintendents because most superintendent preparation programs include little professional development in strategic manners of communication. Glass et al. (2000) suggested that the number of changes in school systems “necessitated parallel changes in educational administration and supervisory leadership preparation programs (Byrd, et. Al. 2006 p.7).”

This study reveals multiple areas that existing superintendents need to address to establish and maintain a positive district culture. However, it is also important that these areas are examined and planned for when a new superintendent arrives in a district to ensure the needs of staff and stakeholders are met and that the influences of these areas on district culture do not become a catalyst to the new appointee’s removal or departure, furthering the cycle of frequent superintendent turnover and resulting in negative influences on the district culture.

The complex challenges that confront superintendents impact both the availability and longevity of those who seek to lead school districts across the country. The average superintendent tenure across the country has dipped to 3.2 years, a figure consistent with the suburban K-12 northeastern U.S. district that was profiled in this study. This turnover,

coupled with increased federal and local mandates, the influence of politics and public scrutiny, further diminishes the pool of applicants for the job.

Many qualified educators and established educational leaders are reluctant to entertain the notion of taking over the helm as top leader of the district for many of the reasons previous superintendents have provided for their departure: family obligations, increased mandates and restrictions, relations with school boards, political implications and public scrutiny.

When examining the state of the superintendency and determining how this study can have an impact, both on a local and national level, it should be asserted that culture is often an overlooked casualty of the frequent turnover of superintendents across the nation. We often look for reasons for turnover, or the effect that superintendent turnover has on student achievement, but not at the influence of this turnover on the overall culture of the organization, how it suffers over time through a revolving door and constant succession of leaders in the superintendent position.

Superintendents of successful districts adopt a “hands-on approach” (Cuban, 1984) and involve all stakeholders in district planning, implementation and follow through. Never has it been more pivotal to the success of our nation to have strong, committed leaders who remain in the school district superintendent position long enough to establish, implement and realize a common shared vision and mission, while positively impacting student outcomes through the creation of an effective district culture.

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APPENDIX A
IBR APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH, DEMONSTRATION OR
RELATED ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**

All material must be typed.

PROJECT TITLE: _____

A Retrospective Case Study on the Influence of Superintendent Turnover on Culture in a K-12 Suburban District

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT:

In making this application, I(we) certify that I(we) have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research, development, and related activities involving human subjects. I (we) shall comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I(we) further acknowledge my(our) obligation to (1) obtain written approval of significant deviations from the originally-approved protocol BEFORE making those deviations, and (2) report immediately all adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Director of the Institutional Review Board, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079.

Victoria Velazquez

RESEARCHER(S)



9-08-16
DATE

****Please print or type out names of all researchers below signature.
Use separate sheet of paper, if necessary.****

My signature indicates that I have reviewed the attached materials of my student advisee and consider them to meet IRB standards.



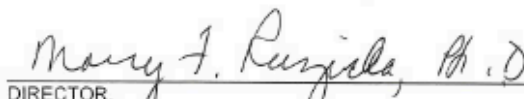
RESEARCHER'S FACULTY ADVISOR [for student researchers only]

9/16/16
DATE

****Please print or type out name below signature****

The request for approval submitted by the above researcher(s) was considered by the IRB for Research Involving Human Subjects Research at the Oct 2016 meeting.

The application was approved ☒ not approved ☐ by the Committee. Special conditions were ☐ were not ☒ set by the IRB. (Any special conditions are described on the reverse side.)


DIRECTOR,
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL
REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

11/21/16
DATE



INFORMED CONSENT

TITLE OF STUDY: A Case Study on the Influence of Superintendent Turnover on Culture in a K-12 Suburban District

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/RESEARCHER: Victoria Velazquez is a student in the Executive Leadership Doctoral (Ed.D.) Program at Seton Hall University.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a K-12 suburban school district.

Procedures:

The subject who volunteers will be asked to do the following:

1. Participants will participate in a one in-depth interview.
2. The interview will take place for approximately 1-1.5 hours. If more time is needed, a second interview will be scheduled.
3. If permission is given to be audio recorded it will be done; otherwise, the researcher will take notes.
4. The researcher will transcribe the interview and a copy will be sent to the participants for accuracy checking.

Instruments

The interview protocol will include semi-structured, open-ended questions such as:

1. Can you give an example how you think superintendent turnover has influenced the culture of the district?
2. Are there internal (hidden or unhidden) influences that impact our district culture?

Voluntary Nature

Participation in this research study is voluntary and participants do not have to answer any questions they do not want to. If at any time, the participant decides that he/she does not want to participate in this study, he/she can withdraw at any time without prejudice.

Anonymity

There is no anonymity in the study due to face to face interviews being conducted by the researcher.

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board
NOV 21 2016

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Executive Ed.D. Program
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Expiration Date
NOV 21 2017

Approval Date FOR THE MIND, THE HEART AND THE SPIRIT

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link participants to this study.

Records

All records will be stored in a locked facility for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded and the audiotapes destroyed. A digital copy of the data will be stored electronically on a USB memory key in the Principal Investigators' office in a locked cabinet.

Potential Risks and/or Discomforts

There are no known risks associated with this research study.

Potential Benefits

There are no direct benefits to participants.

Compensation

No compensation is associated with participation.

Contact Information

If the participant has questions as to their rights as a human subject, he/she can contact Dr. Mary Ruzicka, the Director of the Seton Hall University IRB Board by telephone (973) 313-6314 or email irb@shu.edu.

If the participant has any questions about the research, he/she can contact the Primary Investigator/Doctoral Student Victoria Velazquez at: Telephone (267) 981-638, Email victoria.velazquez@student.shu.edu or the Faculty Advisor Dr. Daniel Gutmore: Telephone (973) 275-2853 Email daniel.gutmore@shu.edu.

Participant Consent:

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. A copy of this signed and dated Informed Consent form will be provided to the participants.

Agreement to be Audio-Recorded or Not:

Please check your preference about audio recording:

- ☐ I agree to be audio recorded.
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio recorded.

_____ Participant Name (Please Print)	_____ Signature of Participant	_____ Date
Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board NOV 21 2016 Approval Date	2	Expiration Date NOV 21 2017

APPENDIX B

Qualitative Contact Summary Sheet

A Case Study on the Influence of Superintendent Turnover on the Culture of a K-12 Suburban School District

Coder: VV

Date Coded: _____

Date of Interaction: _____

Type of Contact:		Who or What Group?	Place	Date	Site
Meeting					
Phone					
Semi-Structured Interview					
Focus Group					

Pick out the most salient points in the contact. Number order on this sheet and note the page number on which the point appears. Number points in the text of Transcriptions. Attach the theme or aspect to each point. I Apply an asterisk (*) to new themes. Comments may be included in double parenthesis.

Page #	Salient Points	Themes/Aspects

(As adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 54)

APPENDIX C
LETTER OF SOLICITATION

Date
Candidate's Name
Superintendent
School District's Name
School District's Address

Dear Colleague:

My name is Victoria Velazquez. I am currently employed as a [REDACTED] in the XXXX Township School District. In addition to my employment in [REDACTED] Township, I am a doctoral student in the College of Education and Human Services, Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

I am requesting to interview [REDACTED] Township staff as part of my doctoral dissertation study. The purpose of said study is to explore the impact of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of the district.

I am inviting you participate in an in-depth interview, which could be audio recorded. The audio recording is optional, based on your consent. I anticipate that the interview will take no more than 60 minutes. It will take place at a location of your choosing.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If at any time you decide that you do not want to participate in this study, you can simply withdraw.

The study will be conducted face-to-face with me. There will be no identifying data on you since you will be asked for a pseudonym to conceal your identity. The pseudonym will be used from the beginning of the audio recording, if you give permission for the interview to be recorded. Otherwise, notes will be taken instead.

If you are willing to be part of my study, or have questions as to your right as a human subject, please feel free to reach me at ([REDACTED]) or email at victoria.velazquez@XXX.XXX.edu by [REDACTED]. Your support and participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Victoria Velazquez
Doctoral Student, Seton Hall University

APPENDIX D
PARTICIPANT REPLY FORM

A Case Study on the Influence of Frequent Superintendent Turnover on
the Culture of a K-12 Suburban School District

Please complete the following:

_____ **I agree to participate (Please check)**

Name: _____

Position: _____

School: _____

District: _____

Phone Numbers:

Cell: _____

Work: _____

Email: _____

Best Time of Day to be contacted: _____

_____ **I would like to receive a copy of the findings upon completion of
the study. (Please indicate “YES” or “NO.”)**

Please complete the form and return to:

vvelazquez@XXX. XXX.edu _____

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below you will find a modified form of James Spradley's (1979) approach to an ethnographic interview and a series of category headings she defined for ethnographic/interview elements. This approach was designed to elicit information regarding the influence of frequent superintendent turnover on the culture of a suburban K-12 district.

Introductory Questions:

1. Are you male/female?
2. What is your position?
3. How many years have you been employed in the district?
4. How many years have you been in your current position?
5. How many superintendents have you served under?
6. How would you describe the current culture of the district?
7. What changes in district culture have you observed over time?

Descriptive Questions

Spradley defines a number of questions that help us to understand the experience of those whom we interview. What follows are questions whose answers describe the experience of interview participants as related to their understanding of the influence of superintendent turnover on the culture of a K-12 suburban district.

Grand tour questions

Could you walk me through a typical school day, including the type of work you do and a description of the environment you work in? Include activities that could occur in district and continue through the steps until the end of your work day.

Can you tell me what your typical week of daily life would look like from beginning to end?

Specific grand tour questions.

Tell me about a recent experience you can remember, from the moment you arrived at the location until the moment you left, that would describe the culture in your assigned building, or in the district?

Guided grand tour questions

Could you describe for me where you were when this happened and some things that you experienced as you were there?

When you thought about something from the district culture, did it affect what you were doing in any way at all? Can you describe the way it affected you?

Task-related grand tour questions

Can you think of evidence that shows changes in the district culture over time? Could you describe what the change over time could be/look like?

Mini-tour questions

Do you think the role of school superintendent has changed over a period of time? How? Could you please share details?

What are areas of conflict in the district that have influenced the district culture?

What areas within the district are influenced by high superintendent turnover?

Specific mini-tour questions

When was the last time you experienced the influence of high superintendent turnover in the district? Can you describe how it took place at that time? How do you think that turnover influences the district culture?

What happens to the culture of the district when superintendents leave? Arrive? Remain?

Guided mini-tour question

Can you describe what occurs in the district routines or activities that influence the district culture that we talked about?

Task-related mini-tour question

Can you describe what you are thinking or feeling about district culture as you work in the district?

Example question

Can you give me an example of how you think superintendent turnover has influenced the culture of the district?

Could you give me examples of outside influences on the district culture?

Are there internal (hidden or unhidden) influences on our district culture (beyond superintendent turnover)?

Experience question

Can you tell me some of your favorite experiences related to the district culture?

Can you tell me some of your least favorite experiences related to the district culture?

Were either of these experiences related to superintendent turnover in the district?

What is the most important overall function of the superintendent that can influence the culture of the district?

Does the district culture impact your ability to do your job in any way?

How does district culture impact you personally?

Direct language question

How would you describe the way you feel when you remember/recall something about the district culture?

How would you describe the way you feel when you remember/recall prior superintendents' tenure in the district?

From your viewpoint, what could a superintendent do to influence the district culture positively? Negatively?

Hypothetical-interaction question

So, if you were telling a friend about an experience that you had related to superintendent turnover and its influence on district culture, how would you describe it to them?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to add?