

**ACCOUNTABILITY FROM THE INSIDE OUT: A CASE STUDY OF ISOLATION AND  
AUTONOMY**

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The working theory of internal accountability has emerged as an alternative model for thinking about educational accountability. Internal accountability is defined by three layers of interaction: 1) individuals' sense of responsibility; 2) shared norms and expectations among individuals in an organization; and 3) the capacity of the organization to direct and support instructional practice (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). Understanding how a school moves along a continuum from weak to strong internal accountability is an area where more research is needed. This study contributes to the understanding of how internal accountability develops by exploring the influence of teacher isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability, with a focus on moving from an atomistic "default" position to a second tier, characterized by shared norms and expectations among individuals in an organization. The capacity of schools to engage in a collective response to mandated external accountability requirements may be a determining factor in whether schools are able to improve student achievement in a substantive and long lasting way.

In this single case study conducted in a western Pennsylvania elementary school, a survey of teachers' perspectives was conducted to assess internal accountability. Individual interviews were utilized to obtain rich descriptions of participants' experience and perspectives related to themes of isolation and autonomy. This study highlights the role of autonomy in the development of strong internal accountability.

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## **GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS**

**AP** – Advanced Placement

**AYP** – Adequate Yearly Progress

**CPRE** – Consortium of Policy Research in Education

**DI** – Differentiated Instruction

**ESEA** – Elementary and Secondary Education Act

**H-ST** – High-Stakes Testing

**NCEE** – National Center on Education and the Economy

**NCLB** – No Child Left Behind

**NDEA** – National Defense Education Act

**PSSA** – Pennsylvania System of School Assessment

**RIM** – Responsive Interviewing Model

**SBA** – Standards Based Accountability

**SBR** – Standards Based Reform

**SERP** – Strategic Education Research Partnership

**STSD** – Steel Town School District

**STE** – Steel Town Elementary

**SDT** – Self Determination Theory

**SBA** – Standards Based Accountability

**SES** – Socio-Economic Status

## PREFACE

To Steel Town Elementary School – I came to this school to conduct qualitative research for my dissertation, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree in education. I have learned so much more than that in the time I spent at Steel Town Elementary School. I am profoundly grateful to everyone who took part in this effort. I did not know anyone when I entered Steel Town Elementary School for the first time, but I did not feel like a stranger for long.

I dedicate this to my family.

To my son and daughter, John and Kristen – It took your patience and understanding for me to complete this program. Time I spent writing was time I did not spend with you. I also want to acknowledge my four legged companion, Dewey. What a joy it is to have such a neat dog. I didn't feel completely alone with you around.

*Thank You.*

To my wonderful husband John – Thank you for helping me realize this dream. If you could see yourself through my eyes, you'd understand how amazing you truly are. You'll always be my hero.

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*Thank You.*

*“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”*

*Albert Einstein*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Steel Town Elementary School building appears as an oasis as one comes down the long driveway from the main road. The modern brick building is a stark contrast to the generally distressed condition of the surrounding area. Outside the building, the school grounds are well kept. Near the front entrance to the school there is a Nature Habitat area, with two outdoor classrooms. This project is supported by grants, contributions and fundraisers.

The Main Office, located just inside the front entrance of the school is generally a hub of activity, with many people in and out. The space is bright. I was greeted by every person I encountered in my visits to Steel Town Elementary School. I don't know if this is typical for elementary school staff, or if it is more characteristic of the local area, but the gesture of kindness helped me feel comfortable and welcome.

This dissertation inquires into how schools build responsible accountability from the inside out, particularly by focusing on the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability. This is a single case study of an elementary school in one Western Pennsylvania school district. In this inquiry, I employ a dual approach to investigating the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of strong internal coherence: a teachers' perspectives survey which taps into measures of internal coherence, and face-to-face interviews with a small sample of teachers in the participating school. The goal of

the interviews is to help gain a solid, deep understanding of the perspectives of individual teachers of their specific school settings, and their beliefs about responsible accountability.

I've settled on these key concepts as a way of making sense of how accountability works within a professional setting. My interest in educational accountability was first kindled when I completed a graduate course in *Education and Society* in the Administrative and Policy Studies department at the University of Pittsburgh, where I was introduced to an area within contemporary pedagogy where I believed that my professional background, talents and skills might be well utilized. In the course, *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, the premier educational policy reform legislation, was investigated from a cultural studies approach to reach an appreciation of the multiple critical components of the agenda. In order to achieve a reasonable grasp of the subject, I concentrated on the NCLB Act and the precarious state of public education in the United States. My awareness of this profound legislation was raised, and I continued to pursue this interest in accountability on multiple levels throughout my doctoral studies. While accountability can be mandated at the state level, change occurs at the level of the school, which must have the capacity to make the necessary improvements.

Since 2001 when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was approved by the U.S. Congress, accountability in education has gained increased importance, largely due to the mandate of an external accountability system that measures student performance by way of high-stakes tests. Currently, educational accountability is most visible in the state-level accountability systems required by law, although the scholarship that addresses public school accountability is “broadly focused, methodologically diverse and theoretically varied” (Gunzenhauser & Hyde, 2007, p.2). Ultimately, a standards-based accountability system is designed to lead to changes

in classroom practices which directly influence student achievement. Yet, none of this occurs in a vacuum. There are many factors affecting the ways policies are influencing student learning.

In the United States, teachers have had a long history of political, social and educational activism, although since the emergence of standards-based reform, there has been a significant shift in educational policy (Little, 2003). Signed into law in January 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act solidified the federal government's role in the standards-based reform movement by elevating test-based accountability to federal policy for U.S. schools (Cuban, 2004). The standards-based reform movement is characterized by a new level of federal government involvement in education, along with "a consistent and ongoing partnership between politicians and corporations" (Mathison, 2004, p.13). While professional associations were key players in the initial development of curriculum standards, groups representing the special interests of politicians and big businesses now dominate the standards-based reform movement (Mathison, 2004).

In order to provide the necessary context for my argument that internal accountability offers a robust alternative configuration for schools to think about accountability in education, and also to establish a solid framework, I begin with a brief historical review of standards-based education reform, followed by a description of external accountability, particularly as it is manifested in the NCLB legislation. The working theory of internal accountability is then presented. For the working theory of internal accountability, I have relied primarily on the work of Ablemann and Elmore (1999), later developed by Carnoy, Elmore and Siskin (2003).

I believe there is tremendous potential here for increasing insight and understanding about this critical topic in education that is affecting practice at every level. Understanding the history of the development of standards-based accountability is important on a number of levels;

the history of the Standards Based Reform (SBR) movement demonstrates that the federal government can have a significant influence on school policy at the state and local levels despite its relatively small share of district and school budgets (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2008). The history of standards-based reform also highlights the importance of cooperation and collaboration between the federal government, states, and other entities (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

Education reform in the United States since the 1980's has been dominated by the setting of standards for what students should know and be able to do. Once set, these standards are then used to guide other parts of the education system. During the last decade, the concept of standards-based education reform has become increasingly synonymous with a set of policies and ideas focused on accountability (Fuhrman, Goertz & Duffy, 2003). This movement has come in the form of state assessment and accountability systems based on performance outcomes. The standards-based reform movement entails significant changes in the traditional structure of the U.S. educational system. Although standards-based reform emerged in the 1980's, it represents a convergence of numerous historical, political, and intellectual forces present throughout U.S. history and the 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular. (Superfine, 2008).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that at no time in the history of U.S. public schools have those in positions of responsibility been "unaccountable" (Cuban, 2004). While the aims of educational accountability have shifted over time, along with notions of what constitutes success, responsibility has remained constant over the last 200 years. The working theory of internal accountability postulates that schools construct their own conceptions of accountability and that all "schools," whether consciously or unconsciously, have firmly established ideas of accountability (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). Historically, states used accountability policies to

monitor and regulate education. State policies were designed to guarantee a minimum level of educational inputs, access to educational programs and services and proper use of educational resources. The school district was the primary target of these systems, and states relied on accreditation processes and program monitoring to insure compliance (Goertz, 2001). Following World War II, a focus on efforts toward efficiency became a type of accountability, defined as “fixing responsibility and providing relevant information on the efficiency and effectiveness of schools to those who make informed decisions” (Cuban, 2004, p. 25).

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the quality of public education became a growing concern to the U.S. government and to the public. This widespread concern was generated in part by the Soviet Union’s successful launch of the Sputnik spacecraft in October, 1957. Sputnik’s success opened the “space age” and was a major source of disappointment and embarrassment to the United States’ national pride. The apparent superiority of Russian scientists (which turned out not to be true) focused attention on the need for higher standards of academic achievement, particularly in mathematics and the sciences (Rury, 2002).

In the wake of Sputnik, President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958, which was a near complete reversal of his previous opposition to federal aid to education, especially federal aid with federal control, which the NDEA contained (D. Martin, personal communication, September 3, 2008). NDEA was a major step in expanding federal aid to public schools although it was focused on math and science programs.

In the years following World War II, race became an overriding issue in the nation’s urban school districts. The election of Lyndon Johnson produced unprecedented civil rights and education legislation, along with “a managerial efficiency movement in government ‘borrowed’ from the military and private sector” (Cuban, 2004, p. 22). As the nation struggled with

questions of inequality and social justice many looked to the schools as a means of overcoming these complex problems.

The U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's most comprehensive education bill to date. A critical part of ESEA – Title I – provides federal funds to schools with a significant number of students from poverty backgrounds (Rury, 2002). The convergence of these socio-political factors (Civil Rights Act, ESEA and Title I) helps explain, in part, the shift in school accountability from providing access to an adequate schooling and efficient use of resources to an increased responsibility for student outcomes, along with a performance-based definition of a high quality education (Cuban, 2004).

In this environment of increased attention to education, states expanded their role to help ensure a minimum level of educational outcomes (Superfine, 2008). Heightened political interest in increased spending on education, along with concerns about students' lack of competence, led many states to initiate minimum competency testing programs (MCT). These tests focused on the minimum abilities students would need to function in society (Goertz, 2003). The use of accountability measures reflected a concern that the quality of schooling could not be improved by simply increasing the amount of resources provided to schools.

By the end of the 1960's, even after legislation poured billions of dollars into school districts with large percentages of poor children, critics from the political left and right claimed that schools were failing miserably at their job of "transmitting societal core values to the next generation" (Cuban, 2004, p. 23). Angry critics from the right pointed out that despite major increases in federal and state spending for both urban and suburban schools, these schools had become polluted by 1960's counterculture. From the political left critics argued that racist

assessment, curricular and teaching practices were embedded in largely white-staffed urban and rural schools (Cuban, 2004). Building on the theme of a “back to basics” movement, business and civic leaders pushed legislators for school reform. Publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 further intensified public scrutiny of education and highlighted the business community’s uneasiness with the quality of public education. The ominous message, mixed with military metaphors, became an alarming call for education reform: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” (NCEE, 1983, para. #1). The report called for multiple reforms, including more rigorous expectations for students, and better teacher preparation. The attention to the inadequate quality of schooling served as an impetus for reform (Superfine, 2008).

Policy makers responded by raising the standards for both students and teachers. The “Excellence Movement” called for higher educational standards, based on the belief that schools were producing students ill-equipped for a competitive global economy (NCEE, 1983).. As a result, many states increased high school graduation requirements, lengthened the school year and added more tests for students to take. However, critics of this reform movement claimed that the reforms were “top down”, overly directive and constraining to schools. They called for more local reforms. In the late 1980’s, Lamar Alexander, then chair of the National Governors Association called for a “horse trade.” He proposed that districts, schools, and teachers should receive increased flexibility in exchange for participating in accountability measures (Goertz, 2001). Unfortunately, although some positive effects were noted, none of the reform movements that were initiated in the 1980’s managed to change the quality of education that was provided to students. Overall educational achievement was sluggish and the U.S. lagged in international

comparisons. Also, reform efforts were generally unrelated to each other, and were sometimes contradictory (Superfine, 2008).

Fuhrman (2001) argues that other reasons for the appeal of standards-based reform include: a) international competitors used similar approaches; b) there were successful American programs (such as Advanced Placement [AP] programs) that could be used as models; c) standards-based reform appeared to be a way to bring together the Excellence and Restructuring movements; and, d) standards reforms offered hope for more equal educational opportunities for all students.

In September 1989, President George H. W. Bush met with the nation's governors to discuss education. As a result of this summit, six national goals for education were established, to be reached by the year 2000. As part of this initiative, the governors indicated that a federal/state partnership would need to be developed in order for the United States to achieve these goals. By the early 1990's numerous forces, including federal and state government officials, business leaders, and education researchers worked on the idea of restructuring the U.S. education system. Throughout the 1990's individual states began mandating curricular and performance standards (Cuban, 2004).

During this tumultuous time, the changing educational landscape affected teaching on multiple levels. From the late-1980's to mid-1990's, increased investments in whole-school reform generated an emphasis on teacher leadership and new definitions for teacher leadership in pursuit of locally defined school reform (Little, 2003). An analysis of constructions of teacher collective initiative and teacher leadership on matters of practice and purpose over a span of 15 years (1988 to 2003) provides insight for understanding the influence of a changing policy and reform picture, as high-stakes accountability became dominant in K-12 public education in the

United States (Little, 2003). During this time there was a significant, although not uniform shift from localized, somewhat individualized activity “very much rooted in individual initiative and small scale collaboration” (Little, 2003, p. 404), toward more organized and systemic efforts to steer teacher leadership toward serving an institutional agenda. An argument can be made that the current accountability movement has produced an intensified and politicized role for the teaching profession, with a growing political orientation, where the demands of educational accountability appear to increase stress while at the same time, negatively affecting time and attention for efforts directed toward matters of teaching and learning within schools and classrooms (Little, 2003).

Although there is evidence that norms of autonomy and non-interference have been a constraint on the exercise of leadership by teachers, whether in formal leadership positions or by those seeking to question educational practices, there is also evidence of individual and collective leadership on matters of teaching and learning in each of the data sets studied, although under highly variable conditions of support and constraint (Little, 2003). Examining the work of teachers and teacher leaders at the level of practice may illuminate how teachers use resources (human and material) to support learning while also expressing the tensions with which teachers must deal on a day to day basis.

## **1.1 STANDARDS-BASED REFORM**

Currently standards-based reforms are ubiquitous across the United States; by state and by federal law, every state is required to have SBR policies in place. Implementation of standards-based reform has entailed fundamental changes in the structure of the U.S. public education

system, as these policies require an increased focus on the academic achievement of students (Superfine, 2008).

Prior to 1965, educational (school) accountability typically consisted of making responsible use of public resources to provide the best possible education for everyone. Since 1965, school accountability has changed significantly. Influenced in part by business leaders, legislators have moved toward tying school funding to student outcomes. Systems of school accountability are increasingly linked to systems of student accountability; there is a general sense that this linkage is good and a general agreement that schools should be held responsible for how well they support student achievement (Beadie, 2004). Arguments are made that this linkage finally provides the political and financial leverage necessary to make schools and teachers concentrate on meeting the needs of failing students (Beadie, 2004). Another way of conceptualizing this shift in school accountability is the perception that students are being made the instrument of accountability. The working idea is that if enough students fail schools will be forced to become more effective.

Within the framework of standards-based accountability, my research topic is focused on expanding understanding of the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of strong internal accountability and, with this contribution to expand the working theory of internal accountability. The selection of *internal accountability* for building capacity has emerged as an alternative to *external accountability*, as it is manifested in the federally mandated system of high stakes tests, rewards and sanctions (Gunzenhauser, 2004). It is believed that in many schools, individual teachers' conceptions about responsibility have a tremendous influence over how schools address accountability issues. This study is focused on schools and teachers, and how they construct their own structures of accountability.

In this study I explore some of the diverse ways in which teachers collaborate to increase student success. I also explore how teachers think about accountability issues in schools, apart from how they respond to external accountability systems. I have used the working theory of internal accountability, initially described by a group of researchers as part of a Consortium of Policy Research in Education (CPRE) project, and later developed by Carnoy, Elmore, and Siskin (2003) as a framework for this investigation. The working theory of internal accountability is based on the premise that schools actually have conceptions of accountability embedded in their daily operations. Schools form conceptions of accountability from a variety of sources, including teachers' and administrators' beliefs about teaching and learning, and a school's response to the challenges of accountability is a product of how it resolves the conflict between individuals' internalized notions of accountability, their shared expectations and the mechanisms that push them to account for what they do.

Based upon my review of the literature my argument is that ecological patterns involved with the development of particular institutions or organizations can be linked to the organizational features of public schools and to the career system found in teaching. Ecological models involve a conceptualization of person(s), environment, and the complicated and evolving interaction between them. This orientation takes a theoretical position that what matters for development is the environment *as it is perceived*, rather than as it may exist in an "objective" reality (Germaine & Gitterman, 1980).

Ecological models are concerned with the processes and conditions that shape the course of human development in the actual environments in which people live (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Here, development is defined as a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with their environment, which requires looking beyond single settings to the relations

between them, as these interconnections can be as decisive as events taking place within a setting. Students' and teachers' development has the potential to be profoundly affected by events occurring in settings in which those with the most at stake are not even present.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law in 2002, the work of teachers and administrators in every public school in every district has been shaped by the standards-based accountability (SBA) provisions of the bill. SBA operates by way of a multiple-step feedback system. Content and performance standards establish goals for the education system, and districts and schools are expected to use these goals to shape their choices of curriculum, professional development, and other activities. Teachers use the standards as learning goals for instruction. Standards also guide the development of statewide student assessments. Student test scores are used as a measure of school success, and high stakes are attached to school performance. Schools that do well are rewarded while schools that do poorly are offered assistance and ultimately are sanctioned (Hamilton, et al., 2007).

This study is focused on schools and teachers, and how they construct their own structures of accountability. In this study I investigate some of the diverse ways in which teachers collaborate to increase student success. I also explore how teachers think about accountability issues in schools, apart from how they respond to external accountability systems.

I conducted this inquiry of the influence of teacher isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability in order to deepen understanding of internal accountability as a means toward authentic education reform and as a reconfiguration of

responsible accountability in an era of high-stakes tests. How internal accountability develops is critical although not well understood. In this study I explore how teacher isolation and autonomy influence the development of internal accountability. I am especially interested in how schools move from individual atomistic responsibility to a level of shared responsibility. These concepts are explored in a literature regarding how isolation became prominent in education, with the primary authors of Ablemann and Elmore (1999) and Carnoy, Elmore and Siskin (2003). I also explore the concept of teacher isolation, with the work of Lortie (1975), Ingersoll (2003), Little (1981, 1990, 1993, 2003), and Sergiovanni (1994). My conceptualization of how autonomy may fit into the development of internal accountability is informed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2004, 2009). My study contributes to developing theories about internal accountability and to a growing but still limited understanding of how this development is influenced by teacher isolation and autonomy by tapping into teachers' perspectives on accountability.

To explain in more precise detail about the inner workings of a school as it works toward greater internal accountability, I utilize self determination theory (SDT) as a scaffold for explication of what happens when teachers collaborate or not, reform or not, take collective responsibility or not. Deci (2009) asserts that effective change in organizations occurs only when people in the organizations have fully internalized its importance (Deci, 2009). Self-determination theory posits that there are basic psychological needs which, when met, allow the importance of a structural change to be internalized (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991).

When applied to education, advocates of SDT maintain that the design of a school reform approach has to begin with a realization that teachers and students alike have three inherent psychological needs: to feel competent in relation to their environment; to feel autonomous in regulating their behavior; and to feel related in a meaningful way to others (Deci, 1991). From

the SDT perspective, the internalization of importance needed for effective change will occur when the nature of the change and the process through which it is facilitated allow for the satisfaction of these inherent psychological needs (Deci, 2009). To the extent that the social context does not allow for the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs, the natural developmental process will be impaired, leading to increased alienation and decreased performance (Deci, 2009).

In an exploratory analysis of data from teacher communities in two schools, on a variety of dimensions, Westheimer (1999) has made it possible to distinguish between schools, along a continuum of certain characteristics and beliefs, by identifying ideology, structures and processes which are connected to, as well as reflective of a complex conceptualization of a professional community. This analysis offers a framework for understanding the development or emergence of a continuum of internal accountability. Within the model, two types of professional communities are described, using the terms *liberal* and *collective* (Westheimer, 1999). In a liberal professional community members maintain individual goals and pursue them independently. Teachers function autonomously, with different goals, strategies and practices. They come together primarily for mutual support. In a collective community the work is interdependent and collaborative. A strong network draws people into community life.

Westheimer (1999) strengthens conceptualizations of community which have typically been vague and disconnected from the complexities of communities in practice. This theory of community is applicable to the development of internal accountability on multiple levels. In both constructs vague terms are used routinely, frequently masking important differences in goals, structures, processes and beliefs. As with professional community, visions of

accountability are plentiful and diverse and conceptions are frequently ambiguous and often contradictory.

By examining the different elements of internal accountability within the context of the school, understanding may be deepened regarding how the energy, motivation, commitment and skill of those who work in schools is brought out. Many schools have diffuse ideas of being accountable *to the children* (Elmore, 2003), and this often means that individual teachers rely on their own views of what their students need, without consideration of the collective views within the school. Some schools have a more developed, collective sense of accountability through shared expectations. A few schools have strong collective views of what they stand for, along with well developed processes to bring the beliefs into action (Elmore, 2003).

Internal accountability is, in part, the result of interpersonal interactions involved in teaching, learning and running a school (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). Developing an understanding of the powerful dynamics occurring inside the school is critical for increasing understanding of how and why schools respond the way they do to external demands, as the effects of external policies are determined by the conditions and constraints that operate in schools and classrooms on a day to day basis (Elmore, 2004). The capacity of schools to engage in a collective response to external accountability demands may be a determining factor in whether schools are able to improve student achievement in a substantive way. Ablemann and Elmore (1999) assert that the effect of external accountability systems is mediated by internal accountability mechanisms.

I believe that one of the great challenges for researchers who study schools is to learn how school organizations contribute to students' academic success. Teachers are members of school organizations and their beliefs influence the development of conceptions of

accountability. The working theory of internal accountability asserts that school-site conceptions of accountability are built out of the human interactions around the work of teaching and learning and running an organization, and that participants in schools are active agents in the creation of the conceptions of accountability under which they operate. This study will yield descriptive data that may increase understanding of how teachers perceive themselves, their colleagues and leadership with respect to elements of internal accountability.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION**

The specific questions and sub questions that I will use in this investigation are as follows

My overarching research question is: How do teacher isolation and autonomy influence the development of internal accountability in schools?

#### **1.3.1 Sub-questions**

1. What does internal accountability look like in this school/district?
  - a. What mechanisms or conditions appear to support the development of internal accountability?
  - b. How have teachers worked to develop internal accountability?
  - c. How have school/district administrators worked to develop internal accountability?

- d. Describe evidence of expectations among teachers with regard to student learning.

2. What are teacher isolation and autonomy?

- a. In what way(s) is teacher isolation identified as a problem/challenge?
- b. How have teachers worked to overcome the problems of isolation?
- c. How is teacher autonomy viewed by teachers in the school?
- d. How have teachers managed the challenge of autonomy?
- e. Can an intrinsic need for autonomy be met within the context of a school milieu of emerging internal accountability?

### **1.3.2 Epistemology and theoretical perspective**

My epistemological stance in the dissertation is constructionist, “focusing exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). A major focus is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. This epistemology is consistent with the working theory of internal accountability, based on the premise that schools actually have conceptions of accountability embedded in the patterns of their day to day operations (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999; Carnoy, Elmore & Siskin, 2003).

My theoretical perspective is social constructionist; when applied to the theory of internal accountability, social constructionism emphasizes the hold that culture has on us, shaping the

way we view the world. Crotty (1998) explains that this shaping of our perceptions and beliefs by culture is to be welcomed as it is what makes us human. However, many recognize that this is limiting as well as liberating. The critical tradition is suspicious of the constructed meanings that culture hands down. It emphasizes that particular sets of meanings can exist to serve hegemonic interests, and each set of meanings supports particular structures of power and resists moves toward greater equity. The central theme of education reform for the past two decades has been accountability for student performance, however there is a disconnection between what education policy prescribes and what seems to happen in schools and classrooms as a response to those policies.

I use an ecological model to explore the idea that patterns involved with the development of organizations can be linked to the organizational features of schools and to the development of internal accountability. These models are concerned with the course of development in the environment *as it is perceived* (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Germaine & Gitterman, 1980).

### **1.3.3 Theoretical context**

The following summary concentrates on the history, development and major points of the working theory of internal accountability and my interest in expanding this theory.

Ablemann and Elmore's 1999 research study on school-site accountability was exploratory and formative in nature. The researchers conducted case studies in a diverse sample of 20 schools (half were in a major metropolitan area on the east coast and half were in a metropolitan area on the west coast). The sample was constructed to maximize the likelihood that schools would vary in their conceptions of accountability (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). The study used a variety of school types-Catholic, independent, charter, and public school. None of

these schools was located in a strong external accountability environment. Researchers looked at schools in states and districts where strong accountability was just coming into practice.

Ablemann and Elmore (1999) found that all the schools they studied had distinctive solutions to the problem of accountability. They describe this array of schools in a three-fold typology reflective of the range of formulations of accountability they observed in their investigation. The default solution to accountability is characterized by individual teacher responsibility, where personal discretion appears to be dominant over organizational expectations or formalized accountability mechanisms (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). A second group of schools reflects discernable effects of collective expectations within the school on individual teachers' conceptions of accountability. The most complicated form of accountability is seen in schools that manage to transform individual responsibility and collective expectations into some kind of internal accountability system. Here, collective expectations gel into a cohesive, interactive system by which teachers and administrators hold each other accountable for their actions.

The researchers emphasize that conditions *within* schools are logically and empirically prior to conditions outside schools when constructing a theory of internal accountability. "We cannot know how an accountability system will work, nor can we know how to design such a system, unless we know how schools differ in the way they construct responsibility, expectations and internal accountability" (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999, p. 198).

My primary interest is in deepening understanding of ways schools move from the baseline, responsibility-driven mode to the level of shared expectations. I project that overcoming the challenges of isolation and autonomy will be key to encouraging and supporting schools in the development of strong internal accountability.

The Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) worked through the initial design phase of a teacher survey portion of an instrument designed to assess and diagnose internal accountability in partner schools. During the fall of 2007, the SERP research team administered the teachers' perspectives survey to approximately 700 teachers in 21 schools. Derived from multiple sources, the purpose of the internal accountability instrument is to provide information about the internal functioning of the school as an organization. Researchers suggest that teachers' sense of efficacy comes from the organizational context as well as past experience. The SERP group uses data from the internal accountability instrument to frame an intervention strategy that might be used by a school to address weaknesses identified by the instrument (SERP, 2009).

When I became aware of the internal accountability instrument that had been developed by the Strategic Education Research Partnership, I contacted SERP. I described my dissertation study and requested permission to use the internal accountability instrument as part of my research on the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability. After submitting more detailed information about my study, I was granted approval to use the internal accountability survey.

Hill et al. (2002) designed a study of internal accountability in 150 charter schools in six states to examine how they develop internal accountability systems. Using extensive case studies of "internal accountability relationships" (p.11) and interviews with school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders inside and outside the school, the investigators found signs of developing internal accountability that survived beyond one or two years. This development is interpreted as a result of schools making and fulfilling promises regarding what students will experience and learn, not by gratifying the needs of different groups. According to the authors,

this helps establish internal accountability, defined as “a belief that [a] school’s performance depends on all adults working in concert, leading to shared expectations about how the school will operate, what it will provide children, and who is responsible for what” (p.3). However, at the conclusion of their research, essential questions remained regarding how schools engage in the process of developing internal accountability. Although Hill’s research was limited to charter schools, and my own research is focused on public education, I believe that examining this important case in terms of what works well and what remains to be investigated helped inform my understanding and shed light on how other schools might also accomplish the goal of strong internal accountability.

My theoretical perspective is a hybrid of critical tradition and constructivism. The context of my dissertation topic is standards-based education reform. Utilizing a critical framework provides the opportunity to see trends, as well as the interactive relationship between policy and politics. I believe that developing an appreciation and perspective of past models of public education is crucial, as current belief systems and practices have sprung from these models.

#### **1.3.4 Significance**

It is my personal goal to have a positive effect on the lives of students. This study of internal accountability and how its development may be influenced by teacher isolation and autonomy contributes to the knowledge base by offering increased understanding of an alternative conceptual framework for accountability and authenticity and offers an opportunity for empowerment of teachers as professionals. Research into the talents of individuals is the

foundation of this (my) work; I strongly believe that the most important factor in any successful learning environment is the people involved on a day to day basis. Effective teachers influence student performance on many levels – not just test scores or even academic gains. Effective teachers influence students' hope, engagement, well being and democratic citizenship.

By further developing the internal accountability theory, I aim to enhance the effectiveness of teachers' shared sense of responsibility and effectiveness in delivery of high quality instruction to help ensure student success.

## **2.0 CHAPTER TWO**

### **2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

My review of the literature is organized around two central themes: teacher isolation and accountability. Conceptually, teacher isolation may appear simplistic; however, isolation is varied and complex and has influenced education on many levels. Development of a complicated understanding of teacher isolation illuminates implications for practice. Autonomy is presented here as an alternative view of the same phenomenon: what might be observed as isolation may actually be an attempt to preserve individual independence.

Teacher isolation has been so pervasive that, over time, it has become accepted as part of the make-up of teaching. Isolation appears to be a major challenge to the development of a shared sense of responsibility and shared expectations for the success of all students. This research project is an investigation of the influence of teacher isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability. Pressures of external accountability, as, for example, mandated use of high-stakes tests for determining student success in school result in numerous consequences, both intended and unintended. District and school response to the pressures of external accountability influence all stakeholders; teachers, students, parents, administrators, community and ultimately, society as a whole.

The working theory of internal accountability is based on the premise that schools actually have conceptions of accountability rooted in the patterns of their day to day functioning. Viewed within this framework, it appears that there may be a connection between teacher isolation, teacher interaction and the organic process of the growth of internal accountability.

## **2.2 THEME ONE: TEACHER ISOLATION AND AUTONOMY**

### **2.2.1 How did we get to where we are?**

This review highlights teacher isolation as a pervasive theme in the history of education. Patterns of isolation were established early, where each teacher was given an assigned responsibility and expected to teach students the subject material without help or collaboration. These patterns are still strong, although increasing numbers of alternatives are being developed and considered.

In order to establish a solid foundation, I begin with a review of the history of teacher isolation. Physical isolation prevailed during the colonial era. Colonial teachers were employed in separate school buildings dispersed throughout settlements. Settlements were established over extensive, sparsely populated territory, and most teachers had little contact with other teachers for long periods of times. Each teacher also spent his or her day isolated from other adults. This initial pattern of school distribution represented a series of “cells” which were self-sufficient (Lortie, 1975).

Lortie argues that teacher isolation resulted from the way schools grew in this “cellular” pattern, articulated both with the school as composed of multiple self-contained classrooms and with chronically high turnover in teaching ranks.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are described by many historians as the period of modernization. Urban and Wagoner (2004) highlight the nationalizing trend that characterized the period following the Civil War. Economic changes occurred during this time which, along with increasing urbanization and a wave of immigration that continued well into the twentieth century affected the lives of most Americans and directly influenced the nation’s schools. As cities grew in size and number, school patterns changed. Two major changes in the living conditions and economy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century America included urbanization and a changing economy.

Urbanization. From 1860 – 1900 the proportion of city dwellers in the United States doubled. Much of this urbanization resulted from domestic migration from farms to the city. The relocation process put an additional strain on traditional family structures which in turn directly affected the nation’s school legislation. Economically, this period was one of “high” industrialization with increased size and complexity of factories and a decreased number of independent artisans. Large scale industry began to invade rural areas.

The change from agrarian to industrial workplace seemed to call for a greater number of formally educated and literate workers. Another aspect of rapid industrial development was the emergence of visible extremes of wealth and poverty. As a result, educators and politicians began to view schools as instruments of social policy that could be used to solve the nation’s problems. The formation of schools consisting of multiple distinct classrooms did not result in a sharp increase in task interdependence among teachers, as individual teachers either taught all

subjects to a particular group of student for a year or, as later developed, taught a single subject to the same group for a specific period of time (Urban & Wagoner, 2004).

The development and growth of urban schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been described as a “one best system” that would be able to serve in all varieties of settings (Tyack, 1974). There were significant differences between the early efforts to create a system of urban education and the preceding system, the Common School. Age grading became the criterion for the organization of urban schools. Prior to this, schools were either a one-room site where all students studied at various levels or a multi-room environment where each room contained a large, heterogeneous group of students. Within the new urban school structure, students were grouped according to their age, and in this way city schools resembled egg crates; they contained multiple classrooms, similar in size, but separated according to the age of the students. Although there were some deviations this style of organization soon became the dominant model. The formation of schools consisting of multiple distinct classrooms did not result in a sharp increase in task interdependence among teachers, as individual teachers either taught all subjects to a particular group of student for a year or, as later developed, taught a single subject to the same group for a specific period of time (Lortie, 1975; Urban & Wagoner, 2004).

Historians are in agreement that the competitive and highly structured environment in schools grew into the same type of predictable bureaucratic system of behavior characteristic of large impersonal organizations. Punctuality and obedience were valued, expected and rewarded, and nonconforming behavior was punished. Teachers became committed to classroom management with factory type rules (Reese, 2005; Tyack, 1974; Urban & Wagoner, 2004).

In the years before and after World War II, what appeared to matter most to school boards, superintendents, academics, and the public was the efficient use of limited resources in providing modern buildings, qualified teachers and textbooks to educate all who entered the school. Schools with these features were viewed as “good schools” (Cuban, 2004). As before, the individual teacher continued to work largely alone with particular students but under the general surveillance of a full time administrator appointed by the board of education.

For much of U.S. history, educational decision-making was quite decentralized. Local school boards had the power to decide what students learned. Teachers typically worked in isolated classrooms and made most of the decisions regarding the education of their students by themselves, although there were broader standards that applied to schools; for example, in the early days of formal schooling, the curriculum provided in a limited number of textbooks, served, in effect, as a curriculum for many schools and provided a primitive sort of national standard (Superfine, 2008). However, there were no formal standards guiding what students were taught.

It took until the 1950’s for opposition to the “egg crate” school to emerge. This coincided with a growing concern about the quality of public education. Lortie (1975) notes a similar opposition seen among advocates of team teaching and open classroom arrangements:

throughout the long formative decades of the modern school system, schools were organized around teacher separation rather than teacher interdependence. Curricula assumed such mutual separation and served coordinating functions by aligning the contributions of teacher in different grades and subjects to student development. (p.20)

Under this style of organization each teacher was assigned areas of responsibility and was expected to teach students the specific knowledge and skills without assistance from others. Once established, the single cell of classroom instruction has remained dominant. The pattern has played a critical role in the development of public education in the United States. As a prominent feature it has become interconnected with other parts of the education system.

### **2.2.2 The complexity of isolation**

The complexity of isolation can be described by considering two perspectives, reflective of two different conceptual orientations to defining the basic nature of teacher isolation (Flinders, 1988). The first perspective defines isolation as a condition under which teachers work. This view helps to bring various characteristics of the teacher's work environment into focus, and highlights opportunities (or the lack of opportunities) a teacher has for collegial interaction. Lortie's (2002) research shares this interpretation, identifying isolation as a product of institutional characteristics rooted in the historical development of public schools. Two factors identified here as contributing to isolation include the cellular organization of schools, and high teacher turnover along with a changing demographic makeup in school enrollments which functionally necessitated that teaching be organized to make changes to the teaching staff easier. In this interpretation the source of isolation is situated inside common characteristics of the school. An implied assumption is that the environment of a school can be defined independently of teachers' experience of that environment. In this way teachers are seen as reactive to the physical and social "realities" of their workplace.

The second perspective defines teacher isolation as a psychological state, not as a condition of work (Flinders, 1988). Within this orientation the workplace is situated inside the

individual and is continuously shaped as information is filtered and processed. Here, isolation depends more on teacher perception and experience with collegial interaction than on the number of interactions in which they are involved. Within this conceptualization, distinguishing between performance and experience sophisticates the understanding of isolation by placing it within the context of how teachers make sense of their work. It allows for recognition that what one teacher or group may see as isolation, others may see in terms of autonomy and professional support.

Teacher isolation has also been described from the standpoint of the individual teacher. A survey of more than 1300 elementary and secondary teachers revealed that while teachers appeared, in general, to function autonomously, this autonomy played out in a context more characteristic of isolation than of professional dialogue or collaboration (Goodlad, 2004). In this survey, three-quarters of the teachers sampled at all levels of schooling indicated they would like to observe other teachers at work. Overall, teachers perceived their awareness of one another, communication, and mutual assistance as weak. An additional finding was that teachers perceived that they and their colleagues were not deeply involved in resolving school-wide problems.

Each of these alternatives offers a different perspective on the sources of teacher isolation. The first perspective locates isolation within the workplace, while the second orientation locates isolation within the teacher. Understanding is deepened by the consideration of isolation from an individual teacher's perception.

An additional perspective may be described as self imposed isolation, where teachers accept their relative isolation and actively strive to maintain it. Self imposed isolation may be rooted in the interpersonal demands of teaching taking a heavy toll on a teacher's desire to seek

additional contact outside the classroom; the practical demands of teaching, due to teaching being an open ended activity; instructional demands frequently surpassing available resources; and collegial interaction being viewed as a distraction and/or threat to professional survival (Flinders, 1988).

In this view isolation can be seen as an adaptive strategy, allowing teachers to conserve scarce occupational resources. This perspective on isolation emphasizes its functional utility and portrays isolation as a solution to the practical demands of providing classroom instruction on a day to day basis. Within this frame of reference there is a dual focus on both the teaching environment and on how teachers make sense of their work within that environment (Flinders, 1988).

Prominent forms of collegiality can be distinguished on the basis of their prospects for altering the fundamental conditions of privacy in teaching, using the argument that the most common configurations of teacher-to-teacher interaction may do more to strengthen isolation than to diminish it. Little (1990) describes four discrete forms of teacher to teacher interaction: In the first conception, *Storytelling and scanning*, observers tended to agree that classroom independence, with occasional contact among colleagues is the modal reality, although there was disagreement regarding its importance. Critics argued that teachers' individual autonomy stalls the ability of individuals and groups to make sense of teaching and to improve it. However, other observers were inclined to discount the negative effects of isolation, particularly among experienced teachers and advocate cautious consideration of the public cost involved in investing greater resources in teachers' time together (Little, 1990).

Ironically, it is because of the unusual combination of clients, products and technologies found in teaching that schools are dependent upon the cooperation and commitment of teachers.

Although the “egg crate” model of school organization may be successful from an administrative perspective it may be at odds with the nature of teaching (Ingersoll, 2003). The argument can be made that although teaching may have a high social content and involve significant interaction with students, teachers are often isolated from their colleagues. Schools vary in the amount of communication, support and collegiality among teachers and administrative staff, but overall, teaching is a very private place as far as involvement with other adults. When the combination of a highly altruistic workforce is combined with a highly isolating work environment and high demands, it is not too surprising that one of the most pervasive aspects of the culture of teaching is a sense of individual responsibility and accountability (Ingersoll, 2003).

### **2.2.3 Why isolation should be a concern to educational researchers**

Teacher isolation has remained largely in the shadows of the education reform movement. However teacher isolation should be a primary concern to educational researchers for at least two reasons: first, past research indicates that isolation is a widespread characteristic of professional life in schools, and second, as isolation may restrict opportunities for professional growth, it can be a barrier to the successful implementation of reform initiatives (Flinders, 1988).

The organization of teaching tasks fosters conservatism of outlook. Change is impeded by mutual isolation, dilemmas of outcome assessment, restricted professional development opportunities, rigidities in assignment, and working conditions which produce a “more of the same” syndrome among classroom teachers (Lortie, 2002). Also, task motivation appears to decline as the tasks become more distant from work with students. Although non-isolated as well as isolated teachers show this decline, there is a difference; for isolated teachers, the decline in motivation is more radical (Bakkenes & Brabander, 1999).

#### **2.2.4 Teachers report feeling isolated**

In an effort to develop strategies for retaining capable teachers, Kardos and Johnson (2007) examined the experiences of first and second year teachers in four states. Their analysis revealed that nearly half of the teachers in the four states report that they plan their lessons and teach their classes alone. Many respondents are expected to be expert and independent from the start. This is a significant concern, as for most, teaching is too complicated to be mastered alone. In addition, a large proportion of respondents indicate they are expected to attain this expertise independently; many do not have access to extra assistance.

Findings on teacher isolation hold special significance for school reform because teaching (compared to the work of other professionals) is highly ambiguous and because isolation has a direct bearing on professional development (Flinders, 1988). Similarly, restricted opportunities for feedback have been identified as contributing to the lack of a technical knowledge base in teaching (Lortie, 2002). Lortie believes anxiety induced by a beginning teacher being fully responsible for the instruction of his or her students from the first working day is increased by the limited support teachers receive early in their career. Because the cellular organization of schools constrains the amount and type of interchange possible, beginning teachers spend most of their time physically apart from colleagues.

Kardos and Johnson's (2007) survey reflects that currently many novice teachers are likely to begin their careers in schools where they must find their own way. This occurs even though new teachers express an interest in and a need for collaboration, and despite evidence that collaboration can help improve school effectiveness.

### **2.2.5 A contrasting view of the desire for collaboration**

It is interesting and revealing that teachers display a strong tendency to describe their work in terms that do not involve collaboration with other teachers (Flinders, 1988). This finding is echoed by Lortie (2002) who observed that in the vast majority of classrooms, teachers continue to work apart from other adults. Opportunities for mutual consultation during the workday were described as limited and contacts between teachers appeared to be peripheral to their major obligations. Additionally, the isolation of grade levels from one another was paralleled by a reported feeling of isolation among teachers who asserted that they had something to offer their colleagues. Veteran teachers expressed frustration that meeting formats did not allow for experienced teachers to share what they knew with more novice teachers (Achinstein, 2002).

The work experience of many teachers is defined by large classes, limited support and district- wide fiscal uncertainty. Flinders (1988) found that under these conditions, teachers were inclined to organize the daily routines of their work in ways that prevented collegial interaction. One outcome that resulted from these daily routines was a minimization of the practical and interpersonal demands that go along with collegiality. In this way, isolation can be seen not only as a condition of work, but also as a strategy that allows teachers to conserve scarce occupational resources. The observation was also made that teachers not only appeared to accept their isolation, but actively strived to maintain it. In this context isolation can be an adaptive strategy for teachers as it protects the time and energy needed to meet immediate instructional demands. The functional utility of isolation is emphasized, and isolation may, in this way be understood not as a problem to be resolved, but as part of a solution to the multiple, sometimes conflicting demands of providing instruction on a daily basis.

The protection of scarce time and resources has been referred to as the *defensive perspective*, as contrasted with an *offensive perspective* on teacher isolation – opportunities to influence other adults in the school (Bakkenes & Brabander, 1999). Within a defensive perspective, school-oriented work may be seen as tasks that take away scarce time, attention and resources without offering something in return that is perceived as meaningful or helpful to the teacher's direct work with students. These defensive behaviors are central to the adaptive perspective on teacher isolation, which recognizes that the protection of opportunities and time to work directly with students is a strong motivator for teachers (Flinders, 1988). This protection is also a strong force guiding teacher communication behavior, as teachers decide about the merit of exchange with colleagues in terms of their work with students (Bakkenes & Brabander, 1999). Teachers' task motivation appears to decline as tasks become more removed from direct work with students and as interdependence among colleagues increases. As a result teachers tend to avoid these tasks, instead focusing on their individual work in the classroom. The avoidance of work related communication may lead up to the isolated position of teachers in their schools.

Support for the idea that professional isolation results from the organizational behaviors of individual teachers and that these behaviors are affected by individual as well as organizational characteristics is provided by Bakkenes and Brabander (1999), who found variations in teacher communication behavior both between and within schools. Schools differed in the extent to which staff members communicated with each other. Within schools, teachers differed in the extent to which they participated in the communication network.

### **2.2.6 Autonomy: isolating force or independence?**

As an indication of preference for classroom vs. school activities, Lortie (2002) asserts that the results are clear: the vast majority of teachers he surveyed chose to spend more time on classroom tasks rather than working with the school at large. The findings of this survey have been interpreted as a reflection that teachers would prefer to loosen organizational claims in favor of teacher decision-making in the classroom.

Distinguishing *types* of collegial relations in terms of their demands on autonomy and initiative may be illuminating, as only in this way can we start to account for the consequences felt in the classroom (Little, 1990). A staff may be described as “close,” offering fellowship, companionship, sympathy, etc., but the nature of collegial relations is composed principally of social and interpersonal interests. Teacher autonomy is based on freedom from scrutiny as well as the right to exercise personal preference; teachers tolerate the individual preferences of others, and independent trial and error is the main route to competence. In all of these ways, the conceptualization of collegiality is defining and reinforcing of a culture of individualism. Paradoxically, these commonly held conceptions of professional autonomy become problematic within the demands of joint work. Among the psychological costs of rigorous collaboration is the loss of individual latitude to act on preference, unexamined by and unaccountable to peers (Little, 1990).

### **2.2.7 Isolation as a challenge to collegiality**

In most school settings, fostering and developing a sense of caring between teachers is a challenge because of their isolation in their own classrooms and their norms of autonomy and

individualism (Achinstein, 2002). In addition, because time and energy are scarce resources in the ecology of teaching, Flinders (1988) found that teachers tended to evaluate collegial interaction in terms of its direct and immediate impact on their ability to complete instructional tasks. For example, one teacher who had been active in his local teacher association early in his career, responded that he gave it up when he realized that it did not do anything to (directly or immediately) help his teaching. Flinders asserts that professional norms dissuade teachers from sacrificing their commitment to job responsibilities, even if that sacrifice can be made in the name of collegiality. By recognizing that isolation may serve to help ensure professional survival, we are in a better position to understand why past attempts to “de-isolate” teachers have failed.

### **2.2.8 Isolation is diverse and the drive toward community is complicated**

Since the 1980's, investigations of teacher collaboration have focused their attention on the structural sources of isolation, cultural norms, using norms to build trust, the relationship between efficacy and school achievement and between collegiality and achievement. The common thread is an interest in how norms and beliefs held by teachers can support or hold back efforts to improve teaching and learning in schools. Pomson (2005) also comments on the common thread running through much of the school reform literature, where teacher isolationism is seen as either an adaptive strategy or a workplace condition. From these perspectives, teacher isolation is seen as a legitimate or at least predictable response. Similarly, Flinders (1988) asserts that making a distinction between performance and experience sophisticates our understanding of isolation by placing it within the context of how teachers make sense of their work. Although isolation can be understood as adaptive to the immediate demands of classroom

teaching, these adaptive characteristics do not resolve its problematic nature. Task demands isolate teachers from their immediate colleagues and also restrict opportunities for them to expand their subject matter knowledge and develop further expertise in instruction content. Paradoxically then, the long-term effects of isolation may undermine the very instructional quality that this work strategy is intended to protect.

The avoidance of work-related communication with colleagues can be described as a result of a teacher's defensive behavior that ends up promoting teacher isolation. Bakkenes and Brabander (1999) argue that the concept of teacher isolation is not handled in a clear and unambiguous fashion. An important complication is that frequently, two levels of analysis are undistinguished. One level is the organization of the school; the other level is the individual teacher. Observations about the social organization of schools, teachers' organizational behavior, and personal characteristics, for example, frequently become enmeshed. Pomson (2005) concludes that without careful attention to the diversity of factors that underlie the concept of professional community and without soliciting the consent of those who are supposed to join them, the efforts to end professional isolation might prove self defeating.

### **2.2.9 Summary**

The aim of this theme of my literature review was to develop a complicated description and analysis of the conceptualization of teacher isolation. I believe this understanding is necessary in order to fully appreciate the complexity of the impact of teacher isolation on education as a dominant pattern and as a challenge to the development and growth of a strong level of internal accountability.

## **2.3 THEME TWO: ACCOUNTABILITY**

The second central theme in this literature review is a discussion of the research literature on accountability. In order to establish the context needed for an analysis of internal accountability as an alternative conceptualization of responsibility, a detailed description of the working theory of internal accountability as both a comparative theory and a scaffold for thinking about accountability is presented. There is, I strongly believe, tremendous potential here for increasing insight and understanding about this critical topic in education that is affecting practice at every level.

### **2.3.1 Definitions and Mechanisms of Accountability**

Accountability, as it is presently defined in educational policy, includes four main ideas: the school is the basic unit for the delivery of education, and so it is the place where teachers and administrators are held to account; schools are primarily accountable for student performance; school-site student performance is evaluated against externally set standards that define acceptable levels of student achievement; and evaluation of school performance is accompanied by a system of rewards, penalties and sanctions targeted at rewarding successful schools and remediating or closing low performing schools (Ablemann and Elmore, 1999).

State accountability systems create incentives for schools and school system improvement by focusing attention on student outcomes, providing data for decision making, and creating a press for instructional change (Goertz, 2001). Accountability systems are described by Elmore (2003) as working by calling upon the energy, motivation, commitment, knowledge and skill of the people who work in schools, along with the systems that are supposed to support

them. He emphasizes that accountability systems don't "cause" schools to increase the quality of student learning and academic performance, but instead initiate a series of events that may result in improved learning and performance.

Numerous descriptions of educational accountability systems (Ablemann & Elmore (1999); Elmore (2003); Carnoy, Elmore & Siskin (2003) emphasize that although all states have developed some form of performance based accountability, they vary in how they address three key design elements: *who* is held accountable, *for what* are they held accountable, and *how*? These are the policy decisions that determine whom the incentives are focused on, the strength of the incentives, and the kind of information available to educators, policy makers and the public.

Under NCLB schools are the primary unit of accountability, a dramatic change from the past when states held school districts primarily accountable (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001; Elmore, 2003). Test scores are aggregated and reported at the school level, and incentives apply to schools, rather than individual teachers or students (Elmore, 2003; Hamilton & Stecher, 2008). The SBA approach focuses on outputs instead of the previous system of holding school districts accountable for offering sufficient inputs and compliance with regulations (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001). Elmore (2003) strongly emphasizes that within the current system the organizational capacity of the school is key in determining the success of accountability policies. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was adopted by Congress because of their belief that this approach to accountability would increase educators' attention to student learning. However, little is known about how the school acts to mediate the pressures of accountability for teachers (Hamilton & Stecher, 2008).

Accountability mechanisms consist of the variety of ways, formal and informal by which people give an account of their actions to someone in authority, inside or outside of the school (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). Accountability mechanisms may be internal or external, formal or informal, and take a wide variety of forms. Within the working theory, a given school's response to the problem of accountability is a result of how it resolves the tensions between individuals' personal values, shared expectations and the mechanisms by which they account for what they do. *All* schools are accountable, although different schools solve the accountability challenge in different ways.

## **2.4 A LANDMARK STUDY**

In the late 1990's a group of researchers, as part of a Consortium of Policy Research in Education (CPRE) project and funded by the U.S. Department of Education, investigated the traditional notion of internal (local) accountability. Their objective was to learn "about how people in schools actually think about accountability in their daily work" (p. 2). This group developed a working theory of school internal accountability based on several key assumptions, including that schools actually have conceptions of accountability embedded in the patterns of their day to day operations; schools' conceptions of accountability develop from the interpersonal interactions involved in the work of teaching, learning and running a school; participants are active agents in the development of the conceptualization of accountability under which they operate; and external accountability systems are only one of many that influence a school's internal conceptualization of accountability. This theory of internal accountability was later developed by Carnoy, Elmore, and Siskin (2003).

The working theory of internal accountability describes a close and reciprocal relationship between three spheres of interaction: 1) individual conceptions of responsibility; 2) shared expectations among participants and stakeholders, and 3) rules of the organization, incentives, and means of implementation that constitute formal and informal accountability systems. Internal accountability refers to the ability of the school to respond to external pressure in a way that improves its performance. This is premised on the notion that in order for a school to improve in terms of meeting set expectations, it has to have the ability or capacity to bring those expectations into the day-to-day operations of the school (Elmore, 2004). Putting increased pressure on atomized schools-with individual responsibility as the norm-will frequently produce a more incoherent organization. Pushing on a relatively coherent organization frequently leads to a higher level of performance (Elmore, 2004; SERP 2009).

In this model it is believed that schools are more likely to have powerful internal accountability systems if the values and norms embodied in the systems are aligned with individual conceptions of responsibility and shared expectations in the schools. A school's response to accountability is a reflection of "how it resolves the tensions, inconsistencies, complementarities between individual's personal values, their shared expectations, and the mechanisms by which they account for what they do" (p.5). It is asserted that how a school responds to external accountability systems is largely determined by the alignment between the school's internal accountability mechanisms and the external accountability system.

In many schools across the country, purposes and expectations about standards-based accountability systems have become "no more than a test based type of compliance" (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001, p.278). Too frequently, the prevailing consensus seems to be that the test measures what policy makers want, and schools should do whatever it takes to teach what the

test measures. Performance based accountability systems are actually based on the idea that calling attention to academic performance will serve as a motivator for schools and all who are involved with them to turn increased attention to what they do, how they teach, and what their expectations are. It is assumed that schools should be held accountable primarily for student academic performance.

However, conditions within schools are prior to conditions outside schools “when constructing a working theory of internal accountability” (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999, p. 42). They argue that it is impossible to know how an accountability system will work, and/or how to design an effective system unless there is understanding of how schools differ in the way they construct responsibility, expectations and internal accountability. It is believed that this is essential to the study of educational accountability in all its forms.

In the research described by Carnoy, Elmore and Siskin (2003), individuals in a variety of schools were asked about how they answer the questions of: to whom, for what and how they were accountable. They conclude that all schools are accountable but different schools solve the problem of accountability in different ways. Also, they found that schools vary in their initial conceptions of accountability and organizational capacity. In most cases, effective solutions to the question of accountability were found to be tacit and informal, developing from individual beliefs and values of teachers and administrators as they played out in daily practice.

In their study of high schools, Carnoy, Elmore and Siskin (2003) began to realize that internal accountability is only one aspect of capacity – a school’s ability to respond to external accountability pressures. In addition to internal accountability, capacity also includes teacher knowledge of subject and pedagogy; how leadership is defined and distributed; organization of the school; style of problem solving; and resources available to the school. Elmore explains that

variation in internal accountability is most likely the main factor in the variability of schools' reaction to externally imposed systems of accountability, and the strength and focus of internal accountability is critical to understanding schools' response to any external accountability system.

My interest and the focus of this section of my literature review is in the area of internal accountability. While it is beyond the scope of my research, other factors identified under the umbrella of capacity also hold potential for deepening current understanding of the complexity of opportunities for strengthening the ability of teachers and schools to withstand pressures of externally imposed systems of accountability.

Ablemann and Elmore (1999) write that “most formal accountability systems are predicated on the assumption that schools should be held accountable mainly for student academic performance” (p.7). However the expectations underlying performance based accountability systems are often unclear to the public, to students, schools and school systems. The authors organized their observations into three categories which they based on schools' responses to the problem of accountability. These are: atomized accountability - individual responsibility dominates; emergence of collective accountability - expectations influences responsibility; and internal accountability – alignment of responsibility, expectations and accountability.

With this research project, I intend to increase understanding of how the categories emerge and develop, and my goal is to reach a deeper understanding of how the development of shared expectations emerges, with respect to the influence of isolation and autonomy. This contribution to understanding the development of internal accountability may help bolster and

strengthen the capacity of the school for dealing with the pressures of high stakes external accountability.

The second tier includes schools characterized by strong mutual expectations. In these schools, a powerful culture of expectation can be observed that shapes individual views around a common purpose. Teachers' work is influenced by the expectations of others.

Ablemann and Elmore (1999) identify this as an important area for future study, particularly whether or not schools can or will develop congruent internal expectations and accountability systems. A related question and the area of focus for me is how schools may develop and strengthen internal norms and processes. The authors conclude that schools will vary in their response to external accountability depending on the (internal) solutions they have in place. They also suggest that the attitudes, values, and beliefs of individual teachers and administrators are key factors in determining the solutions that schools construct to address issues of accountability. While the presence of an internal accountability system does not necessarily predict how a school will respond to external requirements, developing an understanding of the powerful dynamics occurring inside the school is critical for understanding how and why schools respond the way they do external demands.

#### **2.4.1 Developing a picture of the emergence of internal accountability**

Schools vary in their responses to external pressure, depending on their level of internal accountability, management of internal structures, ways leadership is defined and distributed, and the ways in which they respond to the knowledge and skill requirements of the new demands. Accountability policies produce variable responses, based upon both the initial

capacity of schools and on whether schools increase or improve their capacities as they respond to the requirements of new policies (Elmore, 2003).

In the working theory of internal accountability emphasis is placed on the idea that schools construct their own conceptions of accountability (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999; Elmore, 2003), and that those schools with strong internal accountability function better under the pressure of external accountability. A given school's response to the demand of external accountability is the result of how it resolves the tensions, inconsistencies and complementarities between individuals' personal values, their shared expectations and the mechanisms through which they account for what they do. Internal accountability refers to the ability of the organization to respond to external pressure or support in a way that improves its measured performance. The underlying premise is that in order for a school to *improve* as measured by a set of external expectations, it has to have the internal capacity to bring those expectations into its daily operations in a meaningful way. There is evidence about the characteristics distinguishing schools with strong internal accountability – a high level of agreement on norms, values and shared expectations that shape their work, from schools with weak internal accountability – low agreement and atomization (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999; Elmore, 2003). But *how* a school can move along a continuum from weak to strong internal accountability is not well understood (SERP Institute, 2009).

#### **2.4.2 Standards Based Reform and Accountability**

Standards based education refers to setting content standards for what students should know and be able to do, by grade and subject area, assessing students' progress toward achieving the standards, and holding schools accountable for results (Mathison, 2004). The development of

standards serves three purposes: to clarify expectations, raise expectations, and establish a common set of expectations. According to the rhetoric of standards based accountability, setting high standards is expected to improve academic achievement by creating higher expectations, which will focus greater effort on student learning (Taylor & Shepard, 2003).

The Carnegie Report, "*A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the Twenty-First Century*", released in May, 1986, argues that in order to be competitive, the United States needs to redesign schools for changing economic and social conditions, asserting that America's competitive edge in world markets is eroding. This redesign would involve a shift to higher order skills along with a shift from goods to knowledge. As this type of work is more complex, it requires a broadening knowledge of events. The report asserts that a new system of education will be needed in order to insure a competitive economy, competent workforce, and a healthy democracy.

The key to the success of building a profession up to the task is in developing a profession of well-educated teachers prepared to assume new roles and responsibilities in redesigning schools for the future. In order to build such a profession the task force recommended sweeping changes in education policy, including the creation of a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards; strengthening educational preparation by requiring a bachelors' degree in arts and sciences as preparation for the study of teaching, along with the development of a professional curriculum leading to a Master in Teaching degree; and a restructured compensation system competitive with other professions (Carnegie Corporation, 1986).

The standards-based reform movement redefines educational outcomes and accountability systems. These ideas have been a part of the educational picture for some time, yet the combination of these elements into a single, consolidated system designed to improve

school performance is relatively new. Some have referred to this system as “the new accountability” (Fuhrman, 1999). For this review I will use the term Standards-based Accountability (SBA).

Under SBA states establish challenging content and performance standards for all students. Then, in what has been described by the National Governors’ Association as a “horse trade”, states give schools and school districts flexibility to design instructional programs in exchange for performance based accountability. States hold schools accountable for student achievement, rather than for compliance with rules and regulations (Goertz, 2001). The belief that by measuring performance and linking it to rewards and sanctions will cause schools and educators to perform at higher levels constitutes the foundation of performance based accountability (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001).

NCLB was designed to improve schools through a standards-based approach to accountability. Standards-based accountability, as described by Hamilton, et al. (2007), is a consolidation of three efforts to improve student achievement: academic standards, standardized assessments and accountability for student outcomes. The standards movement rejected earlier reform measures, which focused on minimum competency testing and mastery of basic skills (Taylor & Shepard, 2003).

SBA operates by way of a multiple-step feedback system. Content and performance standards establish goals for the education system, and districts and schools are expected to use these goals to shape their choices of curriculum, professional development, and other activities. Teachers use the standards as learning goals for instruction. Standards also guide the development of statewide student assessments. Student test scores are used as a measure of school success, and high stakes are attached to school performance. Schools that do well are

rewarded while schools that do poorly are offered assistance and ultimately are sanctioned. Under NCLB, each state constructs its own SBA system (Hamilton & Stecher, 2008).

The dominant approach to educational accountability is outcomes- based, where an external authority sets performance goals for students, schools or school systems, and holds individual schools directly accountable for meeting the goals. Consequences are applied, including rewards for meeting goals, and sanctions for not meeting them (Mathison, 2004). The use of SBA as a strategy for education reform is rooted in a belief that alignment of goals, along with imposition of incentives are necessary to overcome educators' resistance to improving instruction (Hamilton & Stecher, 2008).

### **2.4.3 Assessing the impact of Standards-based Accountability**

It is hard to overstate the impact that SBA has had on elementary and secondary education. The shift from minimum competency testing to holding students or educators directly accountable for scores is one of the most significant changes in testing in the last fifty years (Koretz, 2008). The basic principle of shaping educational practice by means of accountability for test scores has become central to educational policy in the United States. There is some evidence that SBA has led to changes in teacher practice that are beneficial for improving student learning. Stecher and Hamilton (2008) point out that, according to district and school administrators, NCLB appears to be raising learning expectations, focusing attention on low-performing groups, promoting alignment between standards and instruction and increasing the use of data for decision making.

On the other hand, critics of standards raise a variety of objections, including the fear that higher standards without additional resources may actually worsen inequalities (Taylor & Shepard, 2003). Additionally, some teacher responses to SBA may not be helpful for student

learning. Examples of negative effects include narrowing of instruction; a shift in emphasis among tested and non-tested subjects; changes in timing of topic introduction to match the testing schedule; shifts in emphasis among tested and non-tested content within a subject; and use of instructional materials designed to mirror the test. At the school level, there are effects that influence teachers jointly, such as reducing or eliminating instruction in non-tested subjects (Hamilton & Stecher, 2008). Regardless of the position one takes in the debate about standards and assessments, teachers and teachers' classroom practices are expected to be the key that will determine the effects of reforms on student learning (Taylor & Shepard, 2003).

Elmore and Fuhrman (2001) examined how various accountability policies interact and how schools are impacted by the various systems, and they developed profiles of state policies regarding assessment and accountability. Their research produced a number of findings, including that accountability for performance requires changes in schools' internal capacities for instruction. This is a *key* finding, as it relates to my dissertation research. The assertion these researchers make is that responding to an external performance-based accountability system is not just a matter of reorganizing existing methods and routines, but that schools must do different things, not just the same things in a different way.

Similar findings were reported by Hamilton and Stecher (2008) who found that SBA policies enacted at the federal and state levels are being felt in the classroom and are influencing what teachers do on a daily basis. Although teachers maintain some autonomy, they report feeling pressured to make changes to their instruction, even when they perceive these changes as conflicting with their personal philosophy of how they should teach. They found that teachers respond to SBA, but they do this in a variety of ways and not in harmony with their colleagues. Their findings suggest that teachers' practices and attitudes are being shaped in multiple ways by

SBA systems. Much of the influence appears to be direct: teachers are responding individually to pressures from the accountability system.

The findings also show that policy mandates continue to have an uncertain relationship with teacher practice. Much more remains to be learned about the relationship between teachers' classroom practice and policies emanating from school administrators and higher levels of the educational hierarchy.

As my understanding of standards based accountability policies deepened, I began to see and appreciate the need for additional research in the area of development of internal coherence as a means of professional strength and flexibility, and I became interested in defining the role of teacher autonomy within internal coherence. I believe this development is a "one step at a time" process and I focus my study on increasing understanding of development of mutual sharing by investigating the impact of teacher isolation and autonomy on this process.

#### **2.4.4 Conclusion**

One essential finding of this review is that schools with strong internal accountability function more effectively under external accountability pressure than schools with weak internal accountability. The degree to which schools can mobilize collective responses to external accountability may be a key determining factor in whether or not schools improve student achievement in response to SBA policies (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999; Elmore & Fuhrman, 2003). Stecher and Hamilton (2008) conclude that evidence of influences on teachers' instructional practices suggests that policies can penetrate the boundaries of the classroom. Additionally, they assert that schools can likely play a role in providing support and encouraging positive instructional response to accountability mandates but that this role does not come

naturally; it represents a drastic change from the typically decoupled relationship between school administration and classroom instruction.

In developing the working theory of internal accountability, Ablemann, Elmore, and others who followed opened the door to a view of accountability from the perspective of schools, rather than from the perspective of external policies. In this way they turned the typical framework of educational accountability inside out. Instead of asking how schools respond to external policies designed to make them accountable to external mandates, they asked how schools come to formulate their own conceptions of accountability. It is my intent to extend this view by studying the influence of teacher isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability, with the hope that this may deepen understanding of this tremendous potential for empowerment. This project may contribute to a greater comprehension of the development of internal accountability and how it might be nurtured, strengthened and grown.

### 3.0 CHAPTER 3

#### 3.1 METHODOLOGY

Operating from a constructionist epistemological perspective, my focus is on developing an in-depth understanding of the process of the development of internal accountability in schools, and, more specifically, on the influence of teacher isolation and autonomy on the development of strong internal accountability. When it is applied to the construct of internal accountability, social constructionism emphasizes the hold that culture has on us, shaping the ways in which we see things (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) asserts that this shaping of our perceptions and beliefs by culture is to be welcomed; it is what makes us human. However, many recognize that this is constrictive as well as liberating. The working theory of internal accountability, first described by Ablemann and Elmore (1999), and later developed by Carnoy, Elmore and Siskin (2003) has emerged as an alternative model for thinking about educational accountability and this working theory of internal accountability is the framework I have used as the basis for my dissertation. According to Ablemann and Elmore (1999), internal and external accountability mechanisms exist in schools to hold people accountable for their actions. They describe accountability as “the variety of formal and informal ways by which people in schools *give an account* of their actions inside or outside the school to someone in a position of formal authority” (p.4).

Ablemann and Elmore (1999) argue that increased accountability is a characteristic of the current era of educational reform and that it has the following features:

1. The school is the basic unit for the delivery of education, and hence the primary place where teachers and administrators are held to account.
2. Schools are primarily accountable for student performance, generally defined as measured achievement on tests in basic academic subjects.
3. School-site student performance is evaluated against externally set standards that define acceptable levels of student achievement as mandated by states or localities.
4. Evaluation of school performance is typically accompanied by a system of rewards, penalties, and intervention strategies targeted at rewarding successful schools and remediating or closing low-performing schools.

Internal accountability is defined by three layers of interaction: 1) the individuals' sense of responsibility for student learning; 2) the shared norms and expectations among individuals in the organization; and 3) the capacity of the organization to direct and support instructional practice (Elmore, 2003). The capacity of schools to engage in a collective response to external accountability requirements may be a determining factor in whether schools are able to improve student achievement in a substantive and long-lasting way.

Isolation has also been a persistent theme in education, and as a student interested in the history of American education as well as in the area of educational accountability I began to question in my own mind how these areas are related and how the tensions between isolation and autonomy and development of shared expectations, crucial to internal accountability, can be addressed.

I consider myself first and foremost a learner. Richard Elmore's ideas leave no shortage of opportunity for learning. I am interested in internal accountability as a model which may be applicable to a variety of challenges faced by educators. My goal in designing this study of internal accountability is in expanding the working theory by way of investigating the influence of isolation and autonomy on development of internal accountability, some of which Elmore has not addressed.

In this study I developed in-depth understanding by utilizing several types of qualitative data (surveys, individual interviews, field notes, and document review) to obtain rich descriptions that capture personal experiences and perspectives. My methodological inquiry is an attempt to hear things from the perspective of the study participants, rather than from the perspective of external policies that exert influence over schools by way of high-stakes tests, rewards and sanctions. In the working theory of internal accountability a key premise is that schools actually have conceptions of accountability embedded in the patterns of their day to day operations, and these conceptions of accountability are present whether they are acknowledged or not (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). In exploring the influence of teacher isolation on the development of internal accountability, I believe I have added to the knowledge of *how* internal accountability develops and, in this way, increased understanding of how schools may build or strengthen internal accountability.

This dissertation is a case study (Stake, 1995, 2010; Yin, 2009) that utilizes a teachers' perspectives survey to provide descriptive information about the strength of internal accountability in the school, and face to face interviews to highlight some of the diverse ways teachers collaborate to increase student success. Additionally I have explored how teachers think about accountability issues in schools, apart from how they respond to external accountability

systems. I used the teachers' perspectives survey to help me understand where Steel Town Elementary School is functioning, in terms of internal accountability, at *my* starting point [beginning of the study], not *their* starting point. This information helped me shape the content and structure of the individual interviews in order to maximize my understanding of internal accountability within this system.

In order to investigate the influence of teacher isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability, I have utilized several theoretical models to inform a methodological approach. A review of the history of teacher isolation highlights its pervasiveness in American education. The pattern played a critical role in the development of public education and has remained strong although alternative patterns are being tested.

Lortie's (2002) definition of isolation as a condition of work identifies isolation as a product of the institutions rooted in the historical development of public schools. Isolation can also be viewed as a psychological state, where the workplace is situated inside the individual, and is continuously shaped and re-defined as information is processed. As I collected survey and interview data, I approached analysis from the respondent perspective in order to develop an appreciation of teachers' perspectives. I also interpreted the data through the lens of theoretical constructs of isolation, autonomy and internal accountability in order to develop a deeper level of understanding.

Self determination theory (SDT) is an approach to human motivation which highlights the importance of individuals' inner resources and defines needs in terms of the nutrients essential for survival and growth (Baard et al., 2004). Self determination theorists assert that psychological needs are essential for growth and well being, and that within education, opportunities to experience *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*, (each representing a basic

psychological need) appear to be essential to promoting optimal growth and integration, and for constructive social development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Consistent with the working theory of internal accountability, the perspective of self-determination theory asserts that effective change in organizations such as schools takes place to the extent that individuals in an organization have internalized its importance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Further, this internalization can occur only when the nature of the change and the process through which it is facilitated allow for the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2004).

Within SDT, the need for competence refers to success at optimally challenging tasks and being able to achieve desired outcomes. The need for autonomy refers to experiencing choice and feeling like the initiator of one's actions. Relatedness refers to a need for establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others. Self determination theory has potential for increasing understanding of the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability, and insight gained here may help with establishing, growing and supporting strong internal accountability in schools.

## **3.2 METHODS**

My study builds on the working theory of internal accountability. Internal accountability refers to “the shared norms, values, expectations, structures and processes that determine the relationship between individual actions and collective results in schools” (Elmore, 2003, p. 197). Simply put, internal accountability is the ability of the organization to respond to external pressure or support in a way that improves performance (Elmore, 2009). A similar description is

offered by Hill (2001): “an internally accountable school is one in which earnest collaboration is forged on behalf of student learning, based on shared commitments about goals and methods” (p. 28). The underlying premise is that in order for a school to “improve” against a set of external expectations it has to have the internal ability to bring the expectations into its daily operations in a coherent way (SERP, 2009). Education reform efforts can be predicted to do well in schools with high levels of internal coherence, but poorly in schools that are fractured. Although there is evidence that schools construct their own conceptions of accountability: to whom, for what and how they are accountable, how internal accountability develops is not well understood (Elmore, 2003).

This study is not meant to highlight the importance of external measures of standards-based educational accountability, such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), but rather to increase the understanding of how internal accountability develops in schools. Schools with strong internal accountability function more effectively under external accountability pressure, and schools with weak internal accountability do not fare as well (Elmore, 2008). My aim has been to approach the problem of accountability from the perspective of schools, rather than from the perspective of externally imposed mandates that currently dominate educational policy.

I am interested in presenting a case study for its uniqueness, and I employ case study to illuminate the fundamental issues and deepen understanding. The authors I draw on to explain my method include Yin (1994), Stake (1995, 2010) and Merriam (2008).

Case study is an empirical inquiry in which focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where boundaries between phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1994). The focus of case study may be a specific issue, with a case (or cases) used

to illustrate the issue (Yin, 1994). I believe this is applicable to my study of the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability.

Initially, the population for the study I planned included public school teachers of students in grades 3 through 6 in western Pennsylvania. Purposive sampling was used to select school districts within Allegheny County. Beginning with the 42 school districts in Allegheny County PA, I compiled public information data on school districts from the Pennsylvania Department of Education website, including state funding for school districts, household income and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports. In order to gain an understanding of funding for school districts I explored equalized millage and aid ratios. I obtained annual average household income information for each school district. In addition to the data gleaned from public records, I also relied on the expert advice and guidance of a member of my committee who has extensive knowledge of the school districts in Allegheny County. I used Elmore's (2003) description of "target" schools, that is, schools facing numerous challenges, including low SES, working toward improvement although not considered failing. Initial contact was made with two school district superintendents, by way of an introductory script that provided an overview of the study. After their review, each superintendent shared the introductory script with principals and teachers.

### **3.2.1 A Tale of Two School Districts**

My initial design was for collection of data in three elementary schools, located in two school districts in Allegheny County, PA. One of the districts has two elementary schools and the other district has one early childhood center (which I did not include) and one elementary school. Once these schools were identified, I worked to gain administrative approval from each school

district superintendent. After administrative approval was obtained, I initiated contact with the school principals in order to provide an in-depth description of my study and what would be involved, and to arrange visits, obtain participant consent, and collect data.

My experience with the two districts was like night and day. One of the schools was Steel Town Elementary School. The principal and staff were welcoming and very accommodating of my research. My experience with the other school district, Evergreen, began on a positive note. I had several conversations with the district superintendent about the study and I received encouragement and verbal support for my research. Written authorization was received from the superintendent. The plan for the Evergreen School District was the same as it was for Steel Town: I would initiate contact with the elementary principal of each school, and make arrangements to conduct research at their school. At this point, I hit a brick wall. Although I tried many times over the course of several months to establish ongoing contact with the two principals, my efforts were essentially futile. I am tenacious by nature, and I really wanted to make this work. Each week I phoned each of the elementary principals and left a polite message with the school office manager, or on the principal's voice mail. Other than a few returned calls, I was unable to get any cooperation from either of the two principals. In the brief phone conversations I did have with either principal, I sensed strong reluctance to becoming involved.

Throughout this process I documented my attempts to establish contact with each of the Evergreen schools. After several months I made my advisor aware of the situation and my growing frustration. After discussion with my advisor and with careful consideration, I developed a redesigned study using mixed methods in a single case design.

While I remain confident that I did everything possible to engage the two Evergreen principals, in hindsight I realize that a feedback loop would have been beneficial. Perhaps a face-to-face meeting with the superintendent and two principals could have prevented the unsuccessful outcome with the Evergreen district. An additional recommendation, based on my unsuccessful experience with Evergreen, would be to establish, in advance, several “check-in” meetings with district principals and the superintendent as part of the initial agreement.

Few research studies end up exactly as planned. Inevitably, unexpected challenges, ranging from minor to major will occur, necessitating changes in order to accommodate these challenges. When this happened to me, I relied on my skills as a seasoned practitioner investigator to adapt my plans for this study. I maintained careful documentation, and, along with my advisor, crafted a revised investigation to produce a classic single case study. During this time, my school district liaison also provided much needed support and recommendations. The revised study reflects adaptability without compromise of rigor.

My research project, a single case study involved two phases:

- I asked participants to complete an online survey about internal coherence. The idea here is that accountability mechanisms consist of a wide variety of formal and informal ways. Responsibility, expectations and accountability operate in a close relationship with each other, and this relationship will vary from school to school. The survey was completed by all 23 participants within 30 minutes.
- I used a semi-structured face-to-face interview protocol designed to take between 45 and 60 minutes. This interview was audio taped with the prior permission of the participant.

Interviews were transcribed and returned to participants for their review and clarification. Fifteen participants completed interviews for this study.

- I completed field notes following each interview I completed and after each site visit to Steel Town Elementary School.
- Document analysis and archival analysis helped me understand the larger contexts of the school within the district; the school within the community; and the school within the historical perspective which includes school, district, and community.

The internal accountability survey instrument was designed by the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) as a tool for use by researchers trying to understand school cultures. Responses to the survey yield descriptive data that can assess internal accountability in schools. The internal accountability survey is used with the permission of the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP), and Harvard University. Although the survey is available to anyone via the internet, I requested permission from SERP to use the instrument in my dissertation research. I first contacted the SERP Institute headquarters in Washington DC. From there I was directed to contact the Boston field site office of SERP, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, under the direction of Dr Richard Elmore. I did contact the Boston field site office, which led to numerous conversations with Michelle Forman, Internal Coherence research associate, who was instrumental in helping me get approval to use the survey. Although SERP is no longer using this version of the internal accountability survey, it remains timely and applicable for my research project.

For my dissertation research I used the internal accountability survey as a means to help me gain understanding of the state of internal accountability within Steel Town

Elementary. After participants completed the survey, and following a preliminary review of the survey results, I initiated the next phase of my dissertation research, as I selected a smaller number of teachers who were then asked to participate in an individual interview. The internal accountability survey was put onto Survey Monkey so that it could be completed electronically. On June 22, 2010, I was able to obtain completed surveys from 23 teachers of students in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 at Steel Town Elementary School. Teacher participants completed the online survey in the computer lab at the school after informed consent was obtained. Informed consent was explained both verbally and in writing. Written consent was obtained from each participant prior to completing the survey.

There are three components to the definition of *coherence*, as a condition for internal accountability: 1) the individuals' sense of responsibility for, and agency toward, student accountability; (2) the shared norms, values, and expectations among individuals in the organization toward student learning; and (3) the capacity of the organization to direct, manage, and support instructional practice-including the processes by which people account for what they do, the principals' practice around supervision and support of instruction, and professional development organized to support instructional improvement. To the degree that these elements are present and working in alignment with each other, the school can be seen as having relatively high internal accountability. Internal accountability precedes and shapes the ability of schools to respond to external pressure and support (SERP, 2009).

The second phase of my research involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a small sample of teachers. This phase was designed to capture the perspectives of individual teachers of their specific school settings. Prior research has indicated that high-stakes

accountability yields differential effects in different settings (Carnoy, Elmore & Siskin, 2003). The structure of the interviews was based on Rubin and Rubin's (2005) Responsive Interviewing Model (RIM). This model allows for research questions to be addressed with a flexible questioning design, with a goal of reaching a solid, deep level of understanding. There are five characteristics of the responsive interviewing model, and I describe them here as they are part of the foundation of this dissertation:

First, interviewing involves the process of capturing respondents' interpretations of their experiences and their understanding of the world. Second, it is acknowledged that the approach, beliefs, worldview and experience of the interviewer matter. Because responsive interviews involve a dynamic exchange, the interviewer must be aware of his or her own opinions cultural definitions and potential prejudices. Third, the interviewer/researcher has an ethical responsibility to ensure that any information shared in a research study is handled with care and that participant confidentiality is maintained. Fourth, the interviewer should exercise care to not impose their own views or opinions on interview participants, but to listen carefully and sensitively to what interviewees tell them. Finally, the responsive interviewing method is flexible and can be adapted to incorporate changing needs as an interview progresses.

Past experience has prepared me well for the role of qualitative research interviewer, and I was eager to begin this phase of the dissertation research. It is my strong conviction that internal accountability is an organic process and that most professional teachers have a strong sense of accountability. In the conversations I had so far with teachers regarding this study, I was pleased with both the number of responses to my request for participation and also to the numerous informal comments I received from teachers, supportive of this effort.

My methodological perspective is in the critical tradition, suspicious of meanings which are passed on, largely unexamined from culture. I identify with this form of research as a type of praxis, “a search for knowledge, to be sure, but always emancipator knowledge, knowledge in the context of action and the search for freedom” (Crotty, 1998, p. 157).

### **3.3 DATA COLLECTION**

I used three methods of data collection. In addition to the online survey and face-to-face interviews, I also reviewed documents to inform my study. A partial list of documents reviewed include: PA Department of Education documents available online (along with numerous follow-up calls to the PA Department of Education); Steel Town School District website; School Matters.com; Steel Town School Board minutes; many historical documents dealing with the collapse of the steel industry, and the effects on the immediate areas; articles on outmigration; school consolidation; PSSA results; newsletters – school and student produced; online newsletter; school policies.

Through several conversations with the local historical society, I learned of a video history of the Steel Town School District, which had been completed by a student as a Senior Project. I was able to get in contact with the writer/producer and obtained a copy of the video, which was an additional source of data and information. My conversations with this writer/producer, a Steel Town School District graduate, and his family, were rich and beneficial.

### **3.4 DOCUMENT REVIEW**

I visited the public relations office at the Steel Town School District office and met with the Public Relations Director of the School District. I requested and reviewed copies of grants applied for and received policies, annual reports, vision and mission statements, along with information about the context in school leaders' work, and their accountability. These documents were important because they provided contextual information on the school and the district. Overall, review of these public documents helped to strengthen my understanding of the research data and provided additional perspectives of the school district. I also obtained copies of archival records about the district, many of which were of the development of the Steel Town School District.

### **3.5 ANALYSIS**

In order to understand the data I employed various data analysis strategies. For analysis of the face-to-face interviews I used open coding as my central method of analysis and read through each of the interview transcripts multiple times, coding them using my research questions as a guide to help generate codes. Reading each transcript multiple times also helped me deepen my understanding of participants' perspectives and to answer my own research questions. I also listened to audio tapes of every interview. My next step after coding was sorting the codes into categories of data, which I used to develop my explanatory schema for my findings.

By collecting data from different sources (i.e., documents, interviews, and survey) I believe I have adequately addressed the threat of bias in the study design (Maxwell, 2005). I

audio recorded each interview to ensure accuracy, had recorded interviews professionally transcribed, and I checked each transcript against the audio recording. Additionally, after the audio recordings were transcribed, I conducted member checks with every interview participant. Each interview participant received a written transcript of the interview they completed, with a request to check for accuracy, possible insensitivity, and new meanings (Stake, 2010).

Most of the interviews were returned with few changes other than correction of grammatical errors or completion of an unfinished thought. Two interviewees did not return their transcript copies, despite my persistent follow up requests. A few participants asked for particularly sensitive information which had been shared in the interview to be kept private. Of course, I honored these requests. While this meant that some important information had to be left out of this report, I fully accept this as fulfilling my duties as a responsible researcher. I do not believe any critical findings were lost, as I was able to increase my understanding of the dynamics of the interpersonal interactions, and how these affected the work environment.

Participant response to member checks was positive. I explained to each participant before the face-to-face interview that they would have the opportunity to review the transcript before the data was analyzed. One participant in particular expressed relief to hear that she would maintain a level of control and would have a chance “to see the interview in writing.” Changes to interview transcripts as a result of member checks were mixed. Even when there were no changes or corrections, teachers wrote me words of encouragement and thanks.

For this section, I have also relied on Wolcott’s (1994, 2009) suggested ways to approach analysis. After the face to face interviews were completed, audio recordings were professionally transcribed. After data was coded I worked to flesh out the theoretical frameworks that guided the data collection, namely the working theory of internal accountability

and theories of teacher isolation and autonomy. I sought out patterns, and I studied extreme responses. In a finishing analysis I contextualized the study in a broader analytic framework.

### **3.6 LIMITATIONS**

One limitation of working to develop strong internal coherence in a school is that there is a need for a long term commitment to this effort, and the sustained commitment needs to be obtained from a large percentage of administrative and professional teaching staff.

For me, a second limitation was selecting a limited number of areas to investigate under the working theory of internal accountability. I frequently needed to remind myself not to introduce more areas for analysis, but, instead to devote the time, attention and hard work to see this study through to completion.

Finally, it is important to note that this study was not designed to explain differences across schools; instead, schools should be considered as independent case studies. My original plan was to carry out data collection in three schools; however, unanticipated difficulties with Evergreen schools necessitated a change of my research to a single case study with Steel Town Elementary School. Even if I had been successful in working with the Evergreen School District, data would have been treated as a collection of single case studies.

## **4.0 STEEL TOWN**

In this chapter, I describe my research site, Steel Town Elementary School, within the contexts of the Steel Town School District, the local community and the larger geographic area. I believe this description is important for understanding the complex nature of this elementary school research site within a school district which serves a group of communities in an area of western Pennsylvania, located just outside of a major metropolitan area. Situating the research site school within the larger context provides an opportunity to include a history of the school within the larger contexts. The history is a fascinating reflection of the birth, growth, and decline of the Industrial Revolution and the steel industry, although times are now tough. This is a story of the geographical area and the communities where Steel Town Elementary School is located. The region is rich in ethnic, industrial and religious heritage; however, since the decline of the steel industry, persistent problems plague the area and its residents.

## 4.1 THE GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

Many post-industrial cities and towns in the United States have been in a downward spiral since American manufacturing began to decline in the 1970's. The struggles include population loss, increasing crime rates, loss of union jobs, suburbanization and an urban environment in a general state of decline. High levels of poverty are common in post-industrial areas, as many have not recovered from the effects of deindustrialization.

Industrial development in the U. S. was not limited to cities; many smaller towns and industrial communities were established and came to life around factories, mills, and plants. Around Pittsburgh, numerous small steel towns were built on the flat land next to the rivers (Lewis, 2004). Steel Town is located in an area which emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a regional center of industry, primarily because of its access to natural resources and proximity to navigable waterways. Here, industrial development took the form of industrial suburbs; smaller urban municipalities, built around a specific industry (steel making), but separate from the central city for geographic, economic and political reasons (Lewis, 2004). Industrial suburbs are smaller municipalities that developed outside of city limits. In some cases this occurred because of a lack of suitable land inside the city, although some industrial leaders built their own company towns, ensuring that they would have control over the municipality. A population boom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century provided workers for expanding industries. Many were immigrants from Europe, who arrived through Ellis Island.

High transportation costs made it very expensive to move coal, while enormous amounts of energy were required to produce the metals, like iron and steel, which were the core of the

Industrial Revolution (Apelt, 2000). Because of the costs involved in moving vast amounts of coke or coal, steel factories were located close to coking furnaces, which were close to the area's vast coal seam. Railroads also figured prominently in the emergence of this area as a center of industry; easy access to shipping was made possible by canals, and later, railroads. The region was one of the first to build railroad service (the Allegheny Portage Railroad). Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the costs of transportation fell dramatically. Many companies relocated outside of the United States, while other manufacturing jobs were moved to lower-wage regions of the country and the world. The result was the closing of many U.S. mills and factories. The entire Steel Town area has undergone serious decline, due to a combination of suburbanization and layoffs at the nearby steel mills, and is now widely known as a distressed area.

Industrial suburbs have fared less well than cities. These municipalities were generally built around one industry: steel. Many of the areas had commercial and retail development but these generally closed when mill traffic and steel making declined, and malls and big box stores opened. Industrial suburbs frequently lack the resources to undertake economic development plans on their own.

#### **4.1.1 What happened?**

Deindustrialization ushered in a host of problems for the entire region. While some saw the rusting of industrial centers as a natural process, others argue that outsourcing and expansion of free trade agreements, which resulted in stiff competition from countries with much lower prevailing wages, were the culprits. International competition has been compounded by the inability and unwillingness of U. S. corporations to adapt to changing conditions; lack of

government action to improve American manufacturing competitiveness; and the lack of union-employer cooperation.

Although I am not from Steel Town, I did grow up in western Pennsylvania. My hometown, J-town, has endured a course of events similar to Steel Town. J-town was once a hub for steel, coal and railroads. The small city was once known as the “Cradle of the American Steel Industry” (Robertson, 2004). At its peak, the mills of J-town employed 18,000 workers. When the large steel mill closed in the 1980’s it was the end of an era that had been the lifeblood of J-town residents for generations. Prior to the shutdown of the steel mills, there was a palpable sense of desperation. I clearly recall a giant billboard which was strategically placed at the entrance to town, just off the highway. The left side of the billboard had a larger-than-life photograph of a man from the shoulders up. His face was a little sweaty and a little dirty. In the photo, the man was wearing a hard hat. The rest of the billboard stated, simply and powerfully, in huge black letters “FOREIGN STEEL STEALS JOBS.” I share this recollection as a connection on a personal level with Steel Town. Tragically this once vibrant area has also become a community struggling to reinvent itself. Although I did not recognize it initially, the devastating loss of jobs in J-town may have played a role in leading me to this work, engaging in research to deepen understanding of ways to improve student learning in schools facing multiple challenges, including job loss, chronic unemployment, and low SES.

The steel crisis was a recession in the global steel market during the 1970’s, following the end of the post World War II economic boom. Steel production had increased exponentially since the Industrial Revolution, and demand had been especially high during the World Wars. Steel prices significantly dropped as the market became saturated with steel, and many steel mills in the Western world were driven out of business.

Residential-industrial communities bore the brunt of industrial decline. Residents' loss of income, along with out-migration, contributed to declining property values in these areas. Population loss, which began following the closing of the steel mills and related industries, has continued over the past ten years (U. S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Lack of jobs forces young people to leave when they finish high school or college. The result is that in many areas there are more elderly residents than young people who would be likely to start families. When people relocate, their former homes and apartments remain, resulting in increasing vacancy rates. When homes or apartments stand empty for a year or more, they may become uninhabitable. One of the communities served by the Steel Town School District has a vacancy rate of 12.9 percent, higher than the average for the county. Vacant homes or apartments may be dangerous, often contribute to crime and may lower the property values of homes around them, thus perpetuating the downward spiral.

## **4.2 THE COMMUNITIES**

Steel Town consists of a group of small communities that share a common school district. When originally settled in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the present day communities were encompassed in one large township. Over a 43 year time span, from 1869 through 1912, several small communities declared themselves independent from the large township and created their own municipalities. Each community operated its own schools. As this occurred, tensions led to rivalries being formed between each independent area. These rivalries continued well into the 1960's.

A history of the Steel Town School District, which is included on the district website, explains that, following the example of other recently merged school districts, the Steel Town

School District was created in July, 1966 to help address challenges, such as school territory, bus routes, and taxation issues. The separate school districts, formed as a result of communities' separation from a larger township, now merged into one school district.

The new Steel Town School District was formed, following meetings of the Steel Town Interim Operating Committee. Decisions were made about which schools would serve as the high school and junior high school, along with decisions about budgets, taxes, transportation teacher salaries and food services. Understandably, the merger caused some initial complications. Although I heard rich and colorful stories of events surrounding the merger, these are unique to the district and relaying them here would pose a threat to my promise to protect the anonymity of this district.

From the time the merged district was created, until 2003, each of the communities continued to operate their own elementary schools. Students came together in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, when they transitioned from elementary school to junior high school. In 2003, a brand new, state of the art Steel Town Elementary School opened. Steel Town Elementary School serves the elementary education needs of all children in the school district in grades 2 through 6. The video history of the school district describes an expectation of the new school district that went beyond its academic mission: "Basically the new school district was responsible for creating a melting pot effect on the area, therefore beginning to make a new generation of local students. With time, the rivalries were erased and the district would be allowed to grow without hesitation" (Cane, 2003).

While the process was not always smooth, there is a level of agreement that the school district consolidation had a critical role in bringing the rival communities together: "We really brought ... communities together through the school system that would've never really come

together on its own. So we did work through the school system and worked through the towns also. Now people identify with Steel Town” (Cane, 2003).

### **4.3 STEEL TOWN SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The Steel Town School District serves 1572 students. Currently, there are 129.5 teachers in 3 buildings. On the School District website, the Superintendent’s Message is directed to students, families, teachers and staff, and the community. The message identifies the need for improvement in academics, along with preparing students with strategies for success in the global society. For staff, accountability will be maintained. Establishing a comprehensive learning community will aid both staff and the community, and will benefit residents of all ages. Using media and technology will help improve communication with families and with the larger community. The school district will continue to offer services for students, parents and senior citizens. The superintendent supports the attitude that the community and the district will continue to grow.

Table 1 offers a description of the demographic make up of the Steel Town School District. The Elementary School staff racial/ethnic demographics echo that of the student population. There is no racial or ethnic diversity among the elementary school staff.

Tables 2 and 3 show the breakdown of free and reduced price school meals for the Steel Town School District, and for Steel Town Elementary School.

Ethnic/racial demographics for the student population include:

**Table 1**

| <b>Ethnic/Racial Demographics<br/>Student Population</b>                         |                |
|--|----------------|
| <b>Race</b>  | <b>Percent</b> |
| White  | 93.8%          |
| African American   | 2.7%           |
| Multi-Racial   | 3.3%           |
| Hispanic   | 0.1%           |
| Asian  | 0.1%           |
|  | 100.0%         |
| Source: STSD public relations coordinator,<br>personal communication, 10/26/2010 |                |

**Free and Reduced Price School Meals:**

Across the Steel Town School District, 45% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches.

**Table 2**

| <b>Free and Reduced Price School Meals<br/>Steel Town School District</b> |              |
|---|--------------|
| <b>District Wide</b>  | <b>Count</b> |
| Free Lunch  | 633          |
| Reduced Lunch   | 113          |
| Source: STSD Food service director,<br>personal communication, 11/8/2010  |              |

At Steel Town Elementary School, 52.5% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches.

**Table 3**

| <b>Free and Reduced Price School Meals<br/>Steel Town Elementary School</b> |              |
|---|--------------|
| <b>Elementary School</b>  | <b>Count</b> |
| Free Lunch  | 264          |
| Reduced Lunch   | 38           |
| Source: STSD Food service director,<br>personal communication, 11/8/2010    |              |

#### **4.4 STEEL TOWN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Steel Town Elementary School is described by the school district as a state of the art facility. The new building has over 300 student computers all networked with internet access. The school also hosts its own state of the art video distribution center.”

On my first visit to Steel Town Elementary School, I was able to experience the computer technology first hand. The initial phase of my research involved a teachers’ perspectives survey. This survey was administered online via Survey Monkey. My presence was required in order to obtain written informed consent.

Making arrangements to conduct an online survey of teachers at Steel Town Elementary School went smoothly. I arrived at the appointed time, checked in at the main office, and was directed to one of the computer labs. The office manager assured me as I left the office in search of the computer lab: “don’t worry, they’ll find you.” I located the spacious computer lab without difficulty, and then I heard myself being announced... “**Attention.** Teachers are to report to the computer lab now. Veronica Kozar, Pitt doctoral student, and NCLB expert n’at, is here to

conduct a survey.” I had forgotten how loud a school public address system was, and I had to suppress a giggle over hearing the colloquialism “n’at” [definition: a “general extender”] (Johnstone & Baumgardt, 2004), used over the school loudspeaker. In less than a minute, teachers began to appear in the doorway of the computer lab, asking me for directions about completing the online survey. “Interesting irony,” I remember thinking, as I stood up to greet teachers and introduce myself as a researcher. In hindsight, I realize that Mrs. Coffee’s loudspeaker introduction gave me instant credibility with the staff at Steel Town Elementary School, as I had now been “officially” introduced and constructed as an expert.

There is a wide corridor from the main office that leads to classroom hallways, the cafeteria, and other parts of the building. At a prominent intersection with another hallway, just outside the cafeteria, several large silkscreen prints have been installed. They are prints of the “old” elementary schools, where students attended in separate communities prior to the construction of Steel Town Elementary School. The prints are aesthetically pleasant although they are a constant reminder of the past. I think the prints are significant symbols, representative of a link to the past, and how things “used to be.” Their presence is also a reminder, good or bad, of a time of rivalries between the communities, when residents of each small community were isolated from people in the other areas. In this new, consolidated elementary school building, I found the powerful, imposing prints of old schools somewhat disconcerting.

#### **4.4.1 The school as a caring community**

My research at Steel Town Elementary School involved collecting data from professional staff, through a survey and interviews, along with document review. I did meet individually with several of the teachers in their classrooms, although it was during times when students were not

present. Interviews that I completed during the school day were conducted in a music room which was not in use for teaching.

As I interviewed faculty participants and listened to the stories they shared with me, I came to know Steel Town Elementary School as a deeply caring community. With close and repeated reflection I found many examples of a caring community – where students are welcomed, protected, supported and encouraged to learn, develop and grow as individuals.

Writing from a constructivist perspective, I believe people construct knowledge in order to make sense of their world. Thus, I believe it is important to include participants' beliefs and practices in order to deepen understanding of how the professionals at Steel Town Elementary School make sense of their experiences, and construct the reality that is their perception of the lived experiences with others. Teachers construct their own understanding of their relationships with others, both individually, and in shared understandings through their own understanding of their experiences (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985).

Evidence of caring took many different forms. During the interviews I heard wonderful stories of caring and how people helped others in times of crisis. “We’ve had a lot of tragedies. People really come together here. Like, they’re very...even though it’s not a...it’s more of a distressed area, people are giving.” This was echoed by another educator who said, “It’s amazing, if something happens in someone’s life, a tragedy, or you know, whatever, like, it’s unbelievable to see.”

Throughout the interviews educators spoke of challenges students face, and how they work toward success for each student. This was sometimes described as “being there” for a student, to help them find a solution to a problem. Sometimes caring was described as instilling a love of learning: “if I could make a difference in a few of these kids’ lives and show them how

important education is...because [for some students] they're not getting that at home." Teachers also spoke of how an over-sympathetic stance is not helpful. One teacher, speaking of students' emotional needs shared that "it's not that I don't have compassion for people who have issues... but, you have to balance it somewhere."

Caring also came through in the interviews as teachers spoke of sharing ideas and materials with colleagues: "we do a good job at sharing out." Another teacher's description mirrored this cooperation: "We do, as a team, share very well."

The qualities that stood out to me as I listened and learned of Steel Town Elementary School as a caring community included: pride, hard working, motivation, helping, and a strong sense of tradition. These are not the only qualities I began to understand as part of this community, but I believe they are a sign; that these are good grounds for working toward internal accountability.

## **5.0 INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY SURVEY-FINDINGS**

The initial phase of my dissertation research involved administration of a survey on internal coherence, developed to capture teachers' perspectives on school and district leadership. In this chapter, while preserving confidentiality and anonymity, I present findings and impressions of school-wide themes, while maintaining a focus on my research interests of the influence of isolation and autonomy on development of internal accountability. Internal accountability refers to the ability of an organization to respond to external pressure in a way that improves its measured performance, and in order for a school to "improve" against a set of external expectations; it has to have the internal capacity to bring those expectations into its daily operations in a coherent way (Elmore, 2003).

Coherence, as a condition for internal accountability, is made up of three elements: 1) the individuals' sense of responsibility for student learning and measured performance; 2) the shared norms, values and expectations among individuals in the organization toward student learning; and 3) the capacity of the organization to direct, manage and support instructional practice, including the processes by which people account for what they do, the principal's practice around supervision and support of instruction, and professional development organized to support instructional improvement. To the extent that these elements are present and working in alignment with each other, a school is seen as having relatively high internal accountability (Elmore, 2007).

The Internal Accountability Survey was designed by the Strategic Education Research Partnership to provide information about the internal functioning of the school as an organization. The instrument taps teachers' responses in five basic domains of organizational life, which emerged from extensive analysis of the Teachers' Perspectives Survey, administered to over 700 teachers in Massachusetts Commonwealth Priority Schools (schools in either corrective action or restructuring), in the fall of 2007.

The internal coherence measures tapped in the Teachers' Perspectives Survey assess a school's organizational capacity to effectively run organizational processes in pursuit of instructional goals. Schools with this capacity are associated with heightened levels of perceived collective efficacy, a faculty's belief in the ability of the organization as a whole to successfully educate students. The effects of perceived collective efficacy on student achievement are stronger than the direct effects of student race or SES, as a robust sense of group capability fosters a strong press for collective performance. Where teachers think highly of the collective capability of the faculty they sense an expectation for successful teaching and may be more likely to put forth the effort required to help students learn. When efficacy is lower, it is less likely that teachers will be pressed by their colleagues to persist in the face of failure, or change their teaching when students do not learn. Teachers' sense of collective efficacy comes from the organizational context as well as successful past experiences. Teacher influence, school climate, the availability of resources, and structures that enable or impede effective instruction all contribute to efficacy beliefs.

## 5.1 INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The Instructional Leadership category of the Internal Accountability Survey taps teachers' perceptions of several aspects of leadership practice, including establishment and communication of a clear vision; setting high standards for teaching and learning; understanding how children learn; tracking student progress inside classrooms, and using assessment data to give teachers feedback. In addition, this category includes items that measure teachers' perceptions of supportive and encouraging treatment, inclusion in important decision-making processes and the level of agreement between teachers and administration regarding instructional strategies to improve student learning.

Figure 1 displays a breakdown of participants' responses to questions about instructional leadership at Steel Town Elementary School. Of the Steel Town Elementary teachers completing the survey, 57 percent feel strongly that the principal expresses expectations clearly and communicates a clear vision for the school. Teachers feel just as strongly that the principal sets high standards for teaching and learning, and presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development.

Fewer than twenty five percent of surveyed teachers feel strongly that the principal knows what's going on in their classroom, although, during individual interviews, I was told that teachers are reluctant to share good news of their classrooms in staff meetings. Similarly, while every teacher is required to submit a Lesson Plan for each six day cycle, only thirty percent strongly agree that the principal actively monitors the quality of teaching. During the interviews, when asked what happens to the lesson plans once they're submitted, the response I received from numerous teachers was "I don't know." While this information is not conclusive, it does

suggest a disconnection between teachers' perceptions of what the principal knows of their classrooms and recognition of some of the ways in which information is gathered and reviewed.

Only a few teachers strongly agree that the principal involves staff members before making important decisions. More teachers strongly agree that the school administration's behavior toward the staff is encouraging and supportive. Most of the teachers I surveyed believe there is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members.

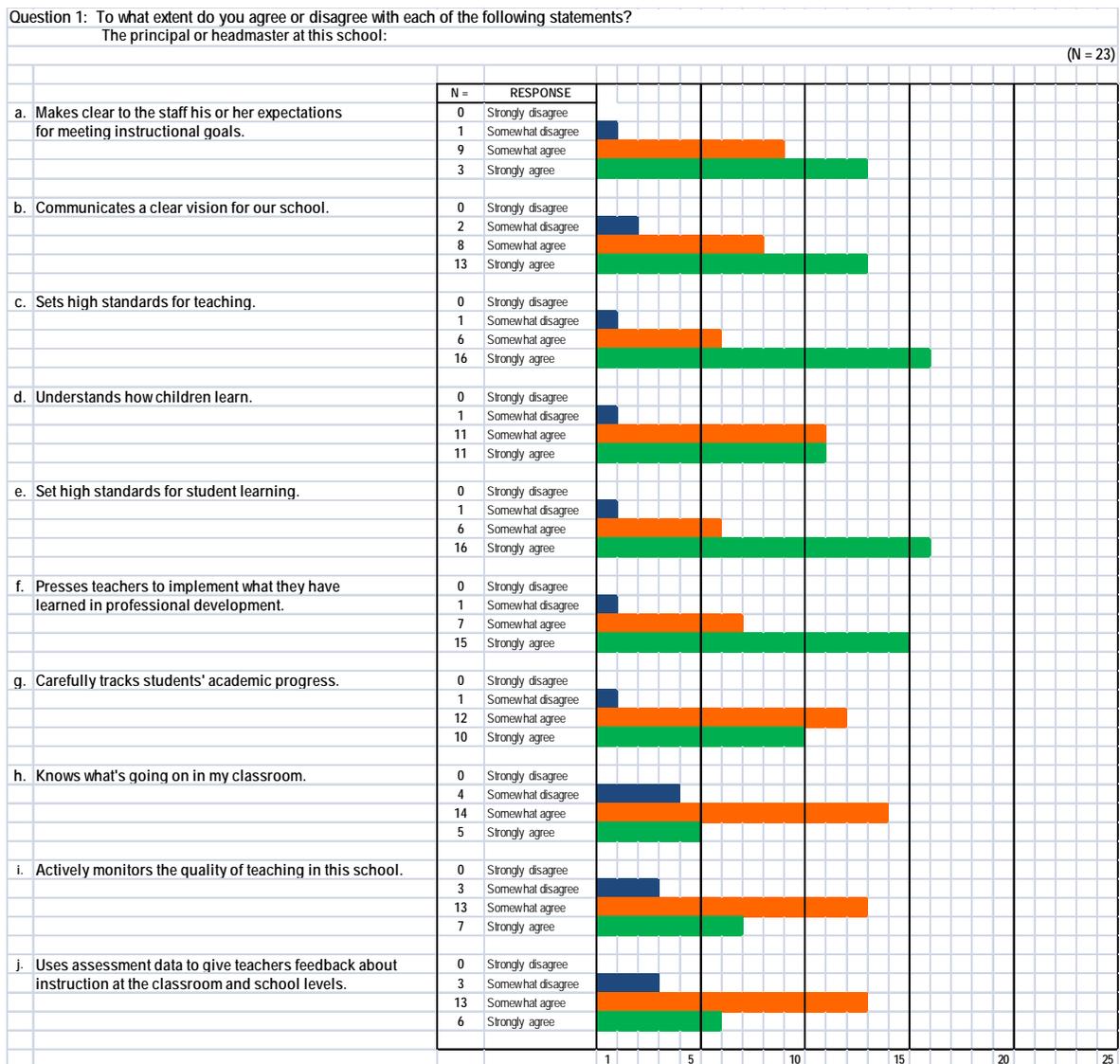


Figure 1

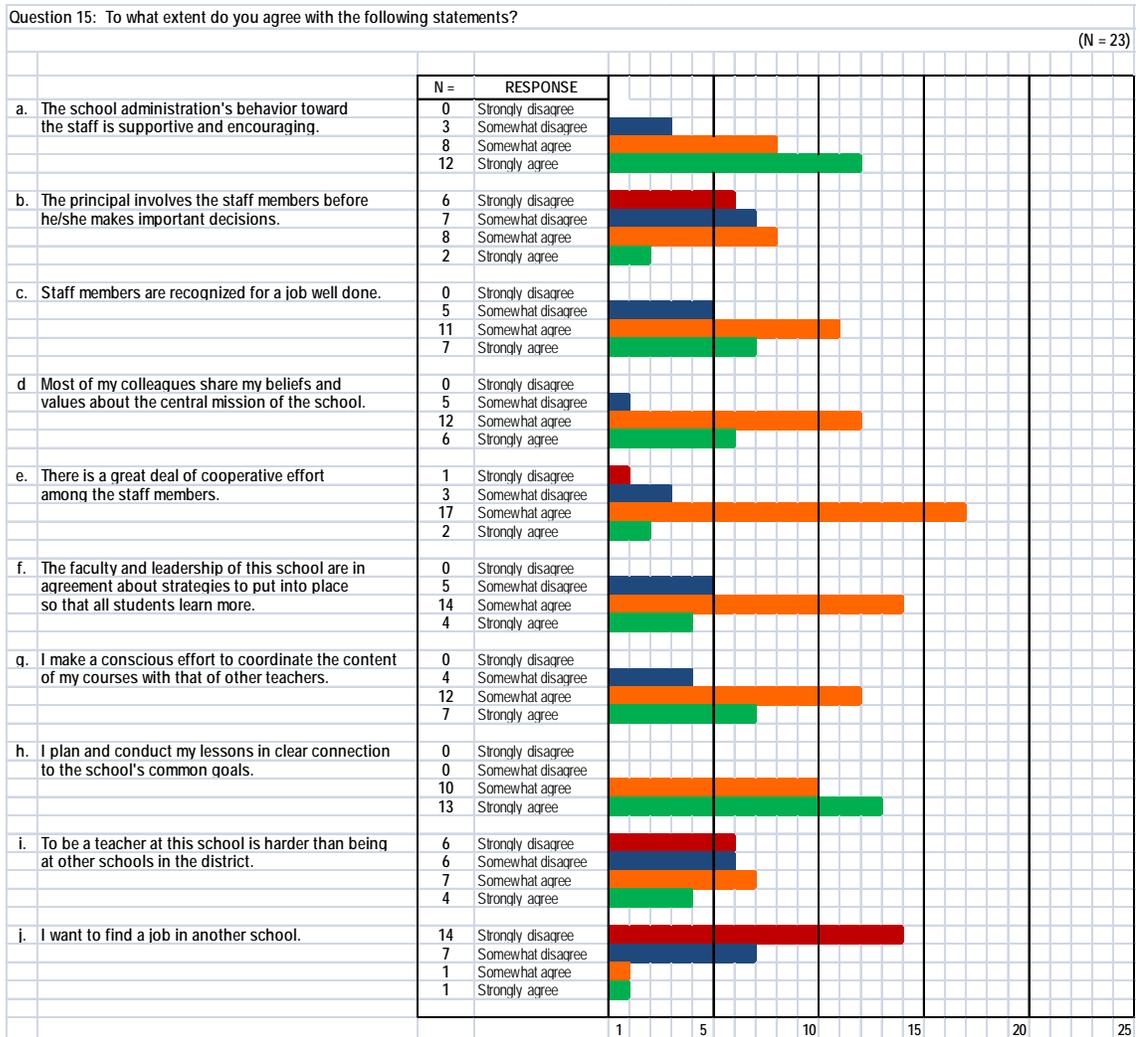


Figure 2

## 5.2 COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

Collective efficacy refers to the beliefs of teachers that the faculty as a whole can carry out the courses of action required to successfully educate students. In other words, collective efficacy is a belief in the ability of the organization to successfully educate students. This category aims to assess teachers' current efficacy beliefs as well as other factors that may enable or hinder levels of efficacy. Efficacy belief questions ask teachers to rate the abilities of their colleagues to get through to difficult students and teach effectively in their assigned subject areas. School process questions tap the extent to which teachers work collectively, share an understanding of the central mission of the school and work to coordinate the content of their classes with the school's larger goals. Climate questions address the degree to which teachers informally discuss teaching and learning, and take responsibility for students and policy outside their own classroom.

At Steel Town elementary, three-quarters of the surveyed teachers agree, at least somewhat, that there is a lot of cooperative effort among staff members, and virtually all of the participants believe that teachers in this school have what it takes to get the children to learn. However, fewer than half said they believe other teachers in the school feel responsible when students fail. So, while teachers perceive themselves and their colleagues as working together in a joint effort-educating students, this perceived cooperative effort has not evolved (yet) to authentic joint work, where a sense of shared responsibility and shared expectations lead to strong internal accountability.

A powerful ninety-two percent of survey participants agreed with the statement "Teachers believe every child can learn." When asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with a statement that "Home life, not teacher instruction, determines whether a student will

achieve in school” over sixty percent of surveyed teachers responded in agreement that it is home life that determines student achievement.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?

(N = 23)

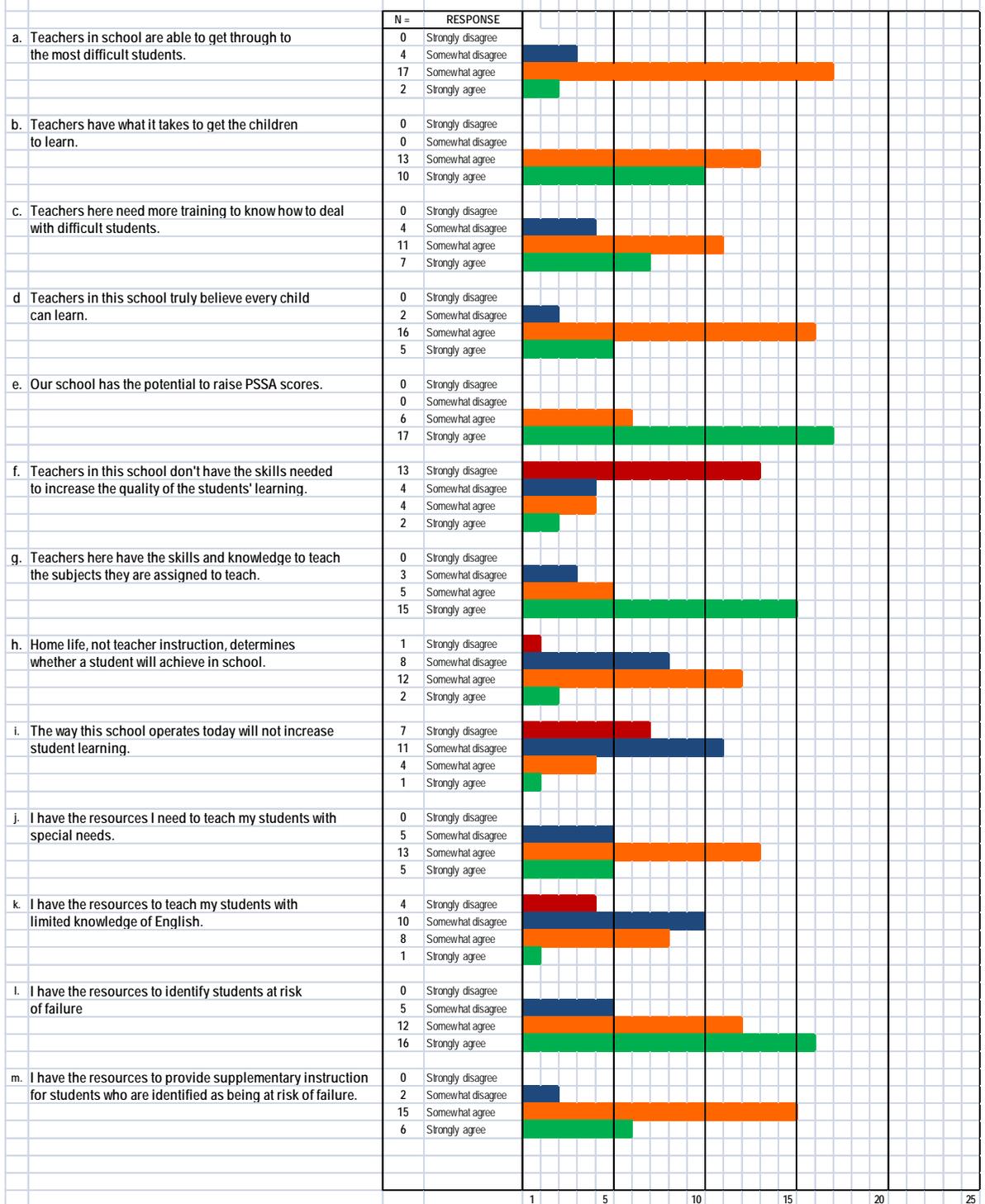


Figure 3

Question 16: To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?

(N = 23)

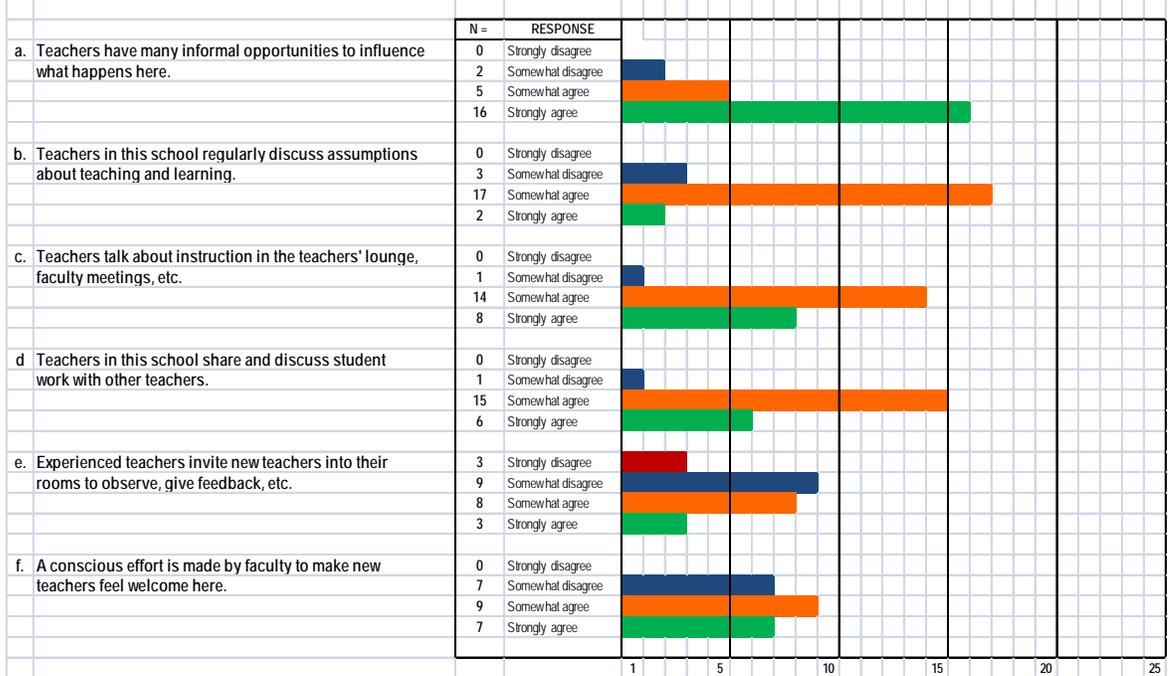


Figure 4

Question 17: How many teachers in this school:

(N = 23)

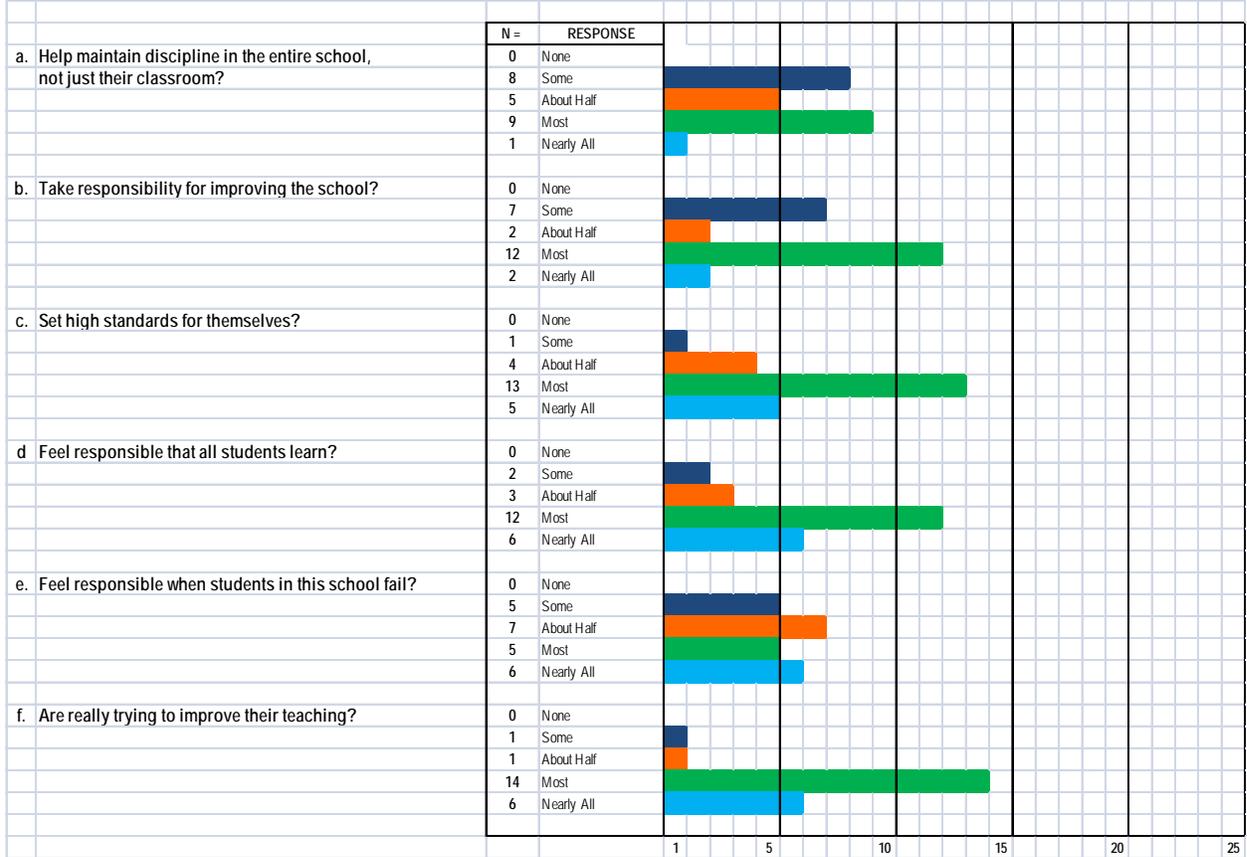


Figure 5

### 5.3 LOCUS OF CONTROL

This category examines teachers' perceived control over their behavior and the outcomes of such behavior. Locus of control refers to an individual's generalized expectations concerning where control over subsequent events resides. This concept is tied to questions of accountability, as locus of control is the individual's perception of *who* or *what* is responsible for what happens. Outcomes are perceived to be either internally controlled by the teacher's abilities and volition, or dependent on external factors, such as environmental conditions or personal characteristics. Locus of control also highlights the importance of structures and actions that enable teachers to exert influence over instructionally relevant school decisions. When group influence is stifled, people are more likely to see the events around them as outside their control. Several questions on the survey tap this construct.

Many teachers at Steel Town Elementary School believe that students' home background is the main reason why the school's results on recent PSSA tests were not higher; this was the most frequently selected response to this question. Parents who don't monitor or assist with student schoolwork was the second most frequent explanation given by teachers, and unmotivated students was third.

When teachers were asked about their second most important explanation for why PSSA results weren't higher, they identified the same three categories as the top explanation, although the categories were sized a little differently. When asked for teachers' thoughts on the third most important explanation of why PSSA scores had not improved, unmotivated students and lack of parental monitoring or assistance were identified, followed by a three-way tie between student home background, discipline problems and students' ability to learn.

Although the most frequent responses to questions of locus of control reflect a perception of conditions outside of teachers' control having the greatest influence over student performance on high-stakes tests, I believe that there is still room for optimism. Viewed through the lens of locus of control, if someone values a particular outcome, and if they believe that taking a particular action will help produce that outcome, they are more likely to take that particular action. In this way, by developing awareness of locus of control, focus can be shifted to maximize the potential of areas for success. There is evidence that this is already occurring at Steel Town Elementary. On my second visit to the school in August, 2010, as I waited briefly in the Main Office for staff to return from lunch break, I had a chance to write down these words from a neon-colored sign hanging in an area of the office visible to anyone who entered: "Education is the quintessential way by which people move beyond the circumstances of their birth."

Questions 11: What do you think is THE MAIN explain why the school's results on the recent state achievement tests (PSSA) were not higher? (N = 23)

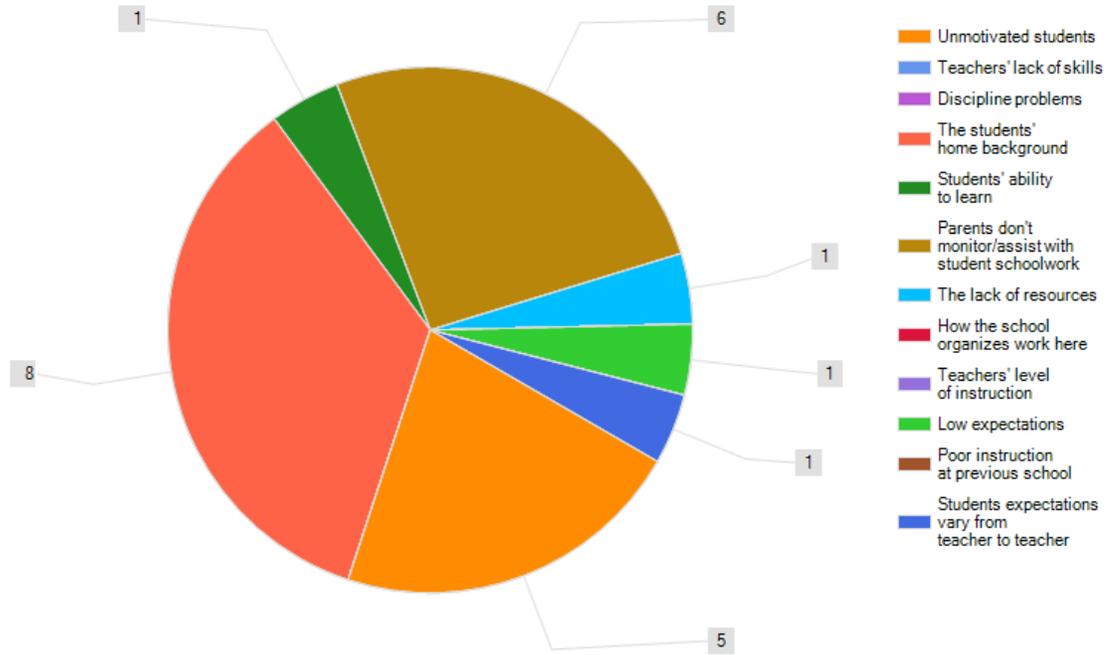


Figure 6

Questions 12: What to you think is the SECOND MOST IMPORTANT explanation for why the school's results of the recent achievement test (PSSA) were not higher? (N = 23)

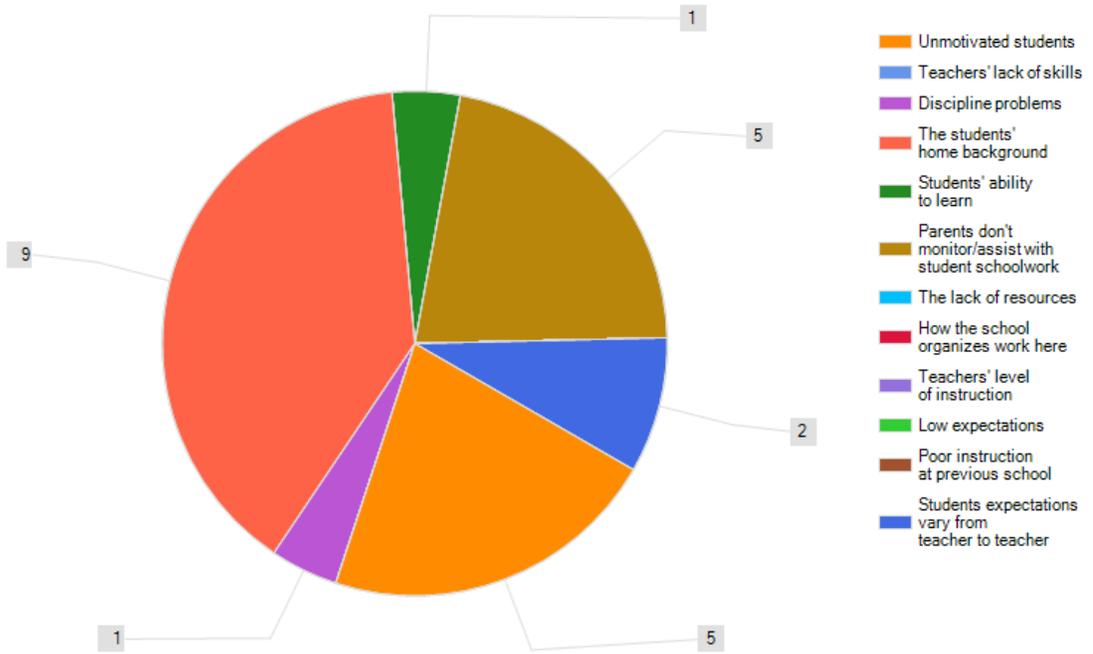


Figure 7

Question 13: What do you think is the THIRD MOST IMPORTANT explanation for the school's results on the recent state achievement tests (PSSA) were not higher? (N = 23)

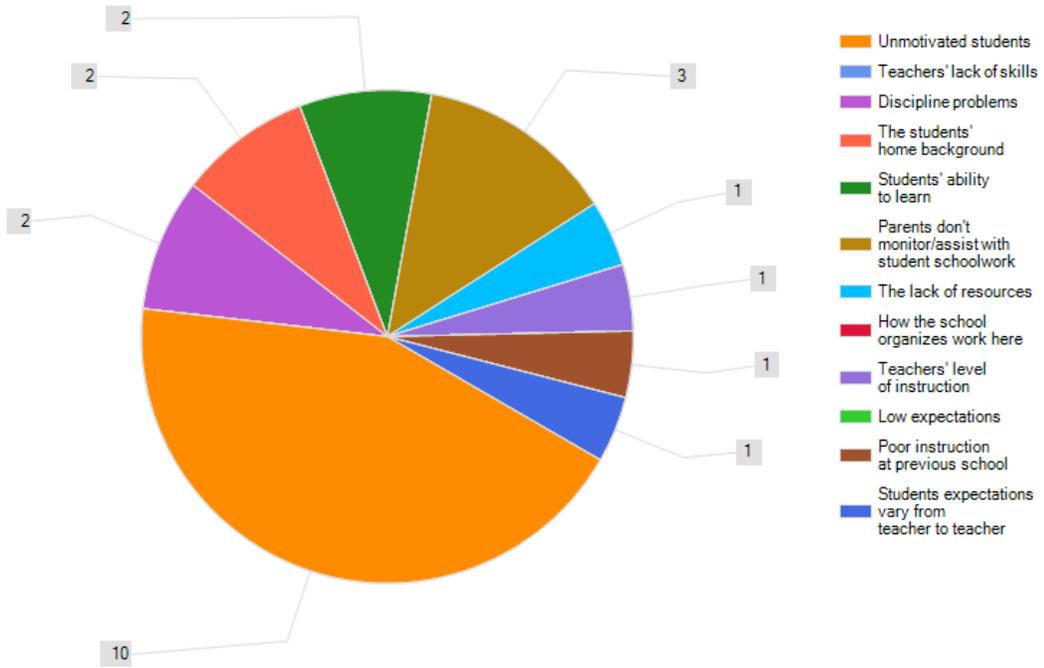


Figure 8

Question 14: Rank the following nine (9) factors, in order of importance, by their influence on how much students learn in school.  
Rank your choices with 1 for the most important, 2 for the next most important, etc.

(N = 23)



Figure 9

## 5.4 ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES: TEACHER INFLUENCE

There is a link between teachers being given the power to influence instructionally relevant school decisions and the likelihood that a school will be characterized by a strong sense of perceived collective efficacy. This link highlights the importance of structures and actions that enable groups to exercise collective agency. On the survey this category includes questions asking teachers to rate the amount of influence they have over school policy and decisions within their individual classroom. School policy questions reference performance standards and curriculum, determining the content of professional development, evaluating and hiring teachers, setting discipline policy and the school budget. Classroom oriented questions ask about the selection of instructional materials, content and teaching techniques and the evaluation of students.

Steel Town teachers rate their level of influence over school policy much differently than how they rate the influence they have in their own classrooms. Looking first at perceived influence over performance standards, fewer than half the surveyed teachers indicated that they believe they have moderate influence in this arena at Steel Town Elementary School. Teachers' responses to a question about teacher influence in establishing curriculum reflects a slightly stronger perceived influence, as 57 percent of respondents indicated feeling that teachers have either moderate or a great deal of influence.

When asked about how much influence they think teachers have over determining the content of in-service professional development programs, only 39 percent indicated they think teachers have a moderate or greater amount of influence. Similarly, only 30 percent of those surveyed think teachers have a moderate or greater amount of influence over setting discipline policy.

Only 30 percent of teachers responded that they think teachers have even minor influence over school policy in the area of teacher evaluation, and even fewer (13 percent) believe teachers influence policy over hiring full time teachers. Over three quarters of the teachers surveyed indicated they do not believe teachers at Steel Town Elementary have any influence in deciding how the school budget will be spent.

In contrast to the perception of limited influence over school policy, teachers completing the survey see themselves as having a great deal of influence in their own classroom. More than sixty percent feel they have moderate or greater influence over selecting textbooks or other instructional materials, although fewer feel that they have that much influence over selecting content, topics and skills to be taught. Teachers report having tremendous influence over selection of teaching techniques; 100 percent of those surveyed indicated they have moderate or a great deal of influence with this selection for their own classroom. 100 percent of those surveyed also have a great deal of influence over the amount of homework that is assigned in their classroom.

It is interesting to find such a clear line of demarcation with regard to perceptions of teacher influence. Teachers at Steel Town Elementary who completed the survey indicated having strong levels of influence over decisions at the level of their own classrooms. This is in stark contrast to the more complicated picture with regard to the very limited influence teachers perceive having over school policy at Steel Town Elementary.

It is not hard to see how the combination of strong teacher influence at the individual classroom level and weak or limited teacher influence at the school policy level may reinforce traditions of teacher isolation and may serve as an incentive for teachers to retreat to the place where they can exercise some influence over their work environment-- their own classrooms.

Conversely, having the power to influence instructionally relevant school policy decisions appears to be related to the development of collective efficacy.

Question 9: How much actual influence do you think teachers have over school policy  
AT THIS SCHOOL in each of the following areas?

(N = 23)

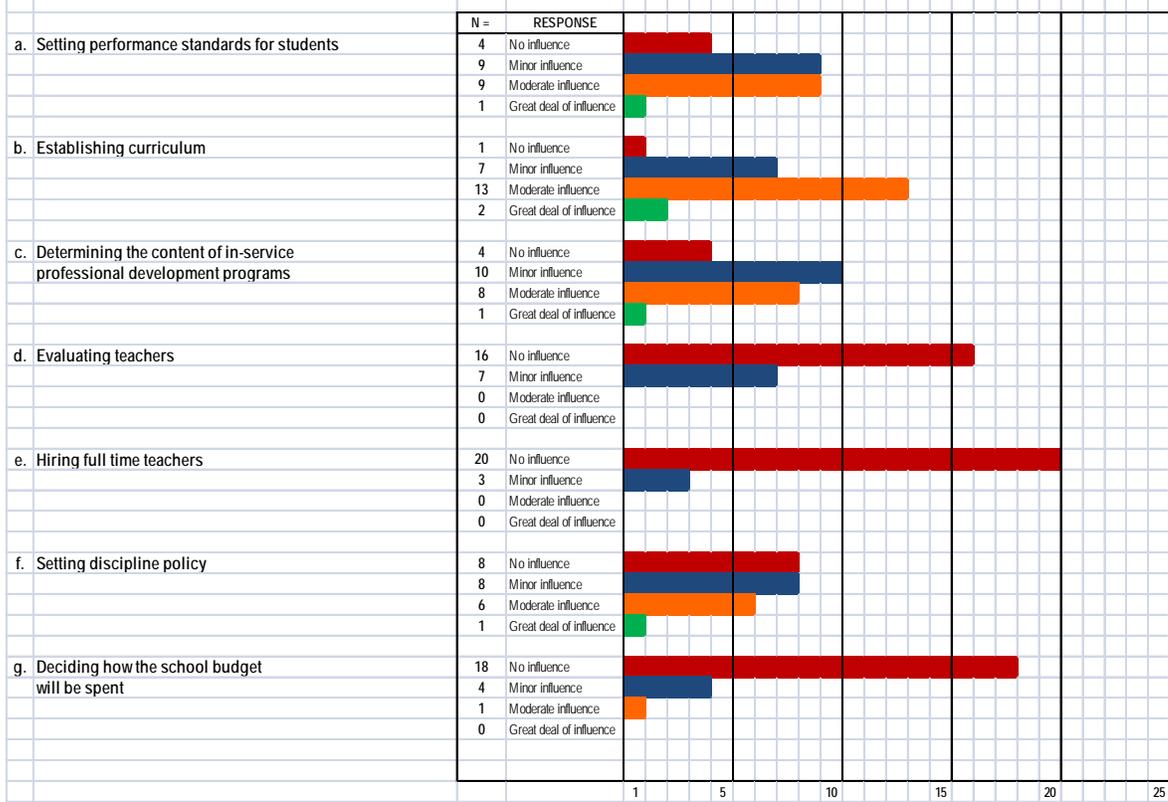


Figure 10

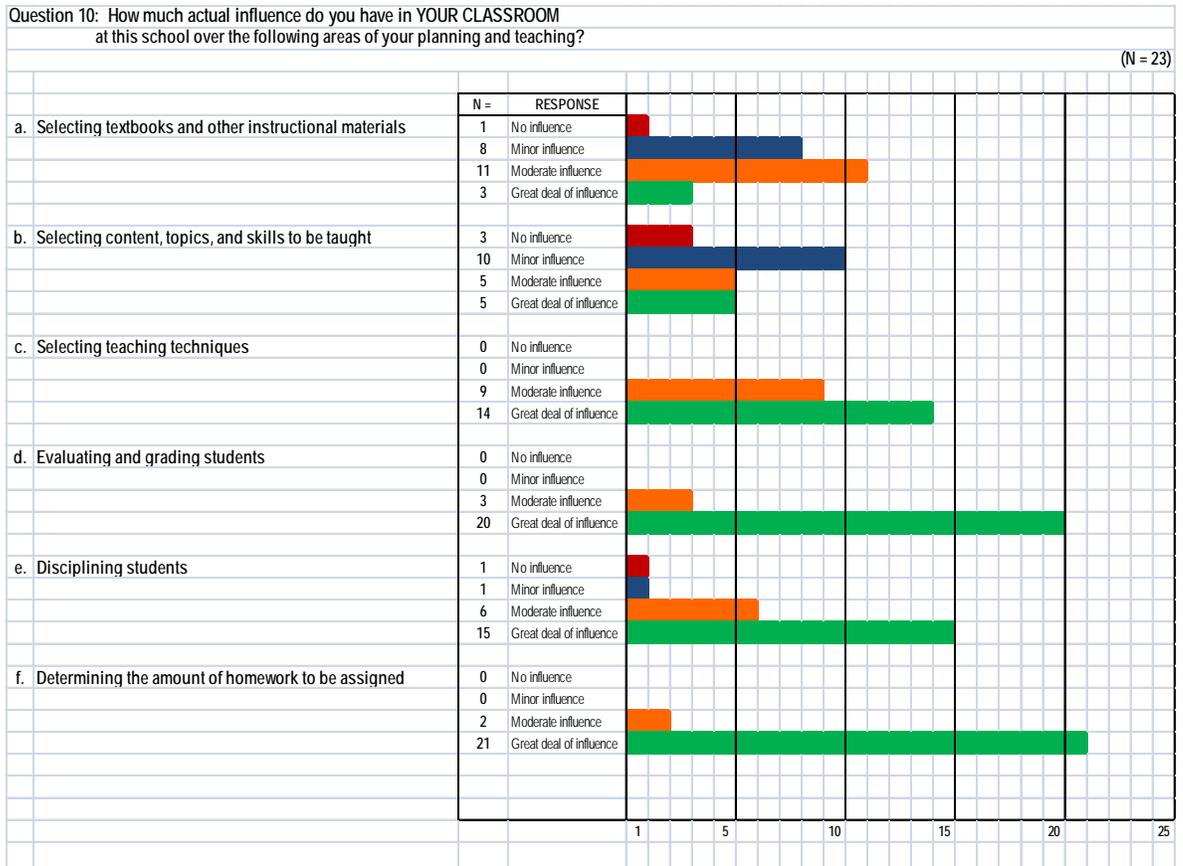


Figure 11

## 5.5 RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

The Resources and Support category was the only category which was not comprised of a discrete set of questions. This category includes several questions which ask teachers to evaluate the degree to which they feel they have the resources necessary to teach students with special needs, as well as English language learners, and the resources to identify and supplement those students at risk of failure. This category also includes several questions from the section on teacher influence over whole-school policy, and several from the instructional leadership component, asking about support from administration, involvement in important decision-making, and agreement over strategies to improve student learning.

This category showed mixed results with regard to teachers' opinions of resources and supports. Almost 80 percent responded that they have the needed resources to teach students with special needs. Still, it is concerning that over twenty percent of the teachers do not believe they have the necessary resources to teach their students with special needs.

Nearly 90 percent of respondents agree that administration is supportive and encouraging, although a question about whether the principal involves the staff before making important decisions was nearly evenly split. 56 percent of teacher participants indicated they somewhat or strongly disagreed with this, while 44 percent somewhat or strongly agreed. There was also a split decision in terms of agreement on a question about faculty and leadership agreement about strategies to implement so students will learn more. 78 percent somewhat or strongly agree with the statement, while 22 percent disagree somewhat.

Responses to this category reveal strengths in resources and support, along with areas where additional support and resources may be needed. Overall, most teachers seem confident that they have the resources necessary to accommodate students with special needs. Another

area of strength is in the response of teachers surveyed that school administration is seen as supportive and encouraging. At the same time, teachers do not feel that they are invited to the table prior to important decisions being made by the principal. These results are fairly consistent with the literature.

Additional insight can be gleaned from responses to these statement questions in Figure three: on this question: “Our school has the potential to raise PSSA scores” virtually every survey participant agreed with the statement. However, when presented with this question: “Teachers in this school don’t have the skills needed to increase the quality of the students’ learning”, while a strong majority of respondents disagreed with this statement, over twenty-five percent agreed that teachers at Steel Town Elementary School don’t have the skills to improve the quality of students’ learning.

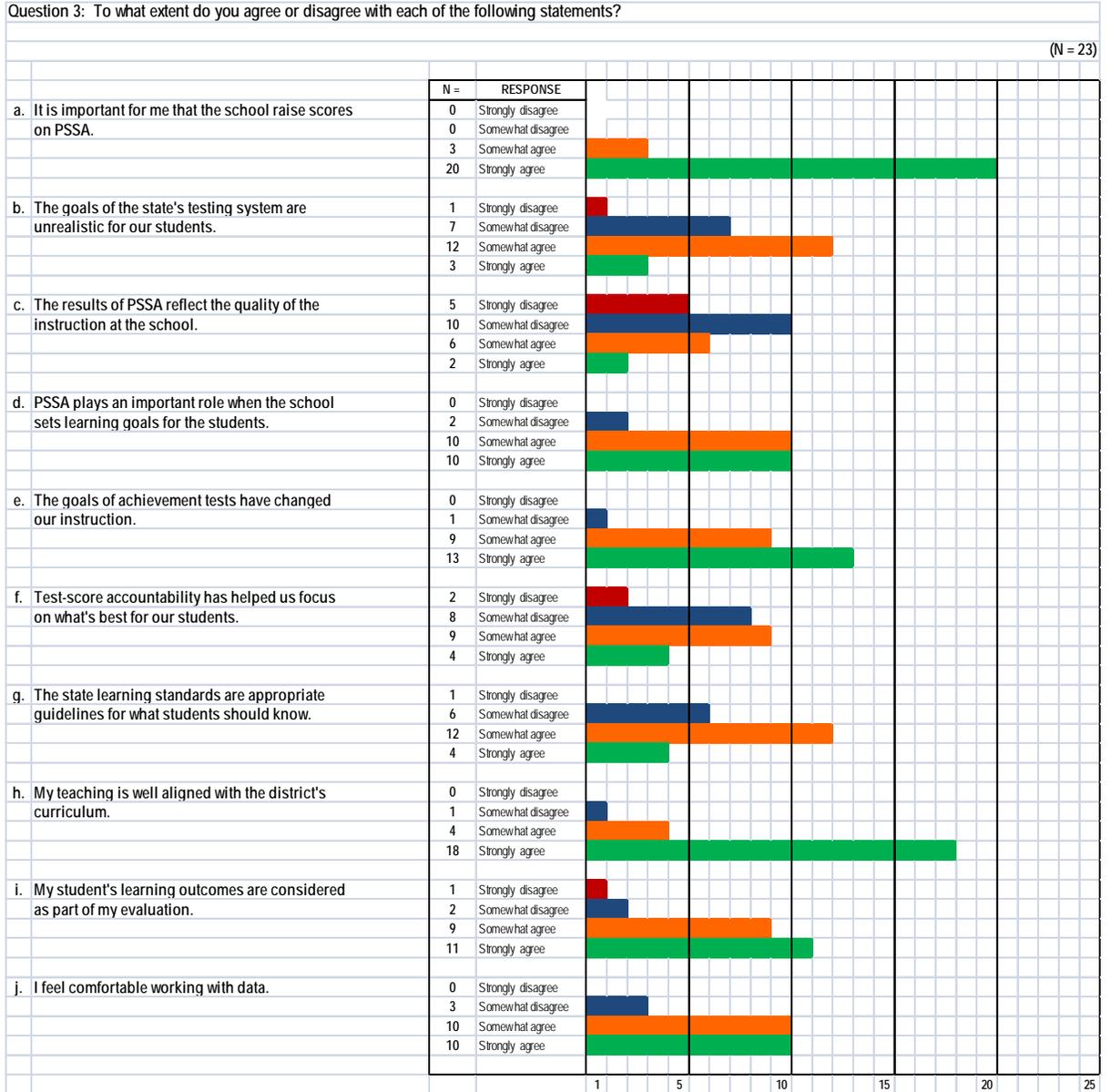


Figure 12

## 5.6 PERCEPTION OF EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

This category includes questions selected to gauge the extent to which teachers' attitudes are in alignment with the external accountability system. Core questions ask teachers to specify how strongly they feel it is personally important to them that Steel Town Elementary School raise scores on the PSSA; how strongly they believe the PA state learning standards are appropriate for their students; and how strongly they believe that test-score accountability has helped them focus on what's best for their students. An additional question asks teachers about the strength of their agreement or disagreement that their school has the ability to raise PSSA scores.

Steel Town Elementary teachers' responses reveal that teachers take the responsibility of raising student scores on the PSSA personally. 87 percent of teachers completing the survey indicated they strongly agree and 13 percent somewhat agree that this is important to them. Taken together with the qualitative data discussed in the next chapter, I believe the strength of this response speaks to the personal commitment, dedication and potential for developing strong collective views of responsibility, shared expectations and internal accountability. There is no question that teachers believe themselves to be responsible for improving student test scores.

A greater percentage of teachers agree that state learning standards are appropriate guidelines for what students should know than the percentage of teachers who disagree. This may reflect a matter of degree however, as just over half somewhat agree but 17 percent somewhat agree. And, while 26 percent somewhat disagree; only 4 percent strongly disagree.

A slightly higher number of teachers agree somewhat that test-score accountability has been helpful in focusing on what is best for the students. 39 percent somewhat agree with the statement, and 35 percent somewhat disagree that test-score accountability has helped with focus on what is best for students. This split may be a result of the perceived influence of other factors

along with test-score accountability, as teachers may use the test scores as one of multiple measures or techniques to define and support what is best for the students. Finally, teachers showed their agreement with the statement “our school has the potential to raise PSSA scores.” While 23 percent agreed somewhat with this statement about the school’s potential, 74 percent indicate they strongly agree.

In summary, the internal coherence survey has very much helped me deepen my understanding of the state of internal accountability within Steel Town Elementary School. The categories into which I have organized survey response data offer a scaffold that provides an initial framework but leaves it to further exploration through qualitative methods to establish a more complete structure of meaning. Working with this survey on internal coherence as the initial phase of my dissertation research has provided me with the opportunity to substantially increase the depth of my understanding of the complex set of events that make up systems of accountability in schools.

The next chapter of this dissertation is a descriptive analysis of findings from individual interviews of select Steel Town staff, which will be woven onto this framework to create a new structure of understanding of the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability.

## **6.0 A CLOSER LOOK AT ISOLATION AND AUTONOMY**

This chapter represents a powerful “snapshot” of Steel Town Elementary School from the perspective of teachers and administrators engaged in the day to day operation of the school. Steel Town Elementary fits the definition of a “target” school, one that is facing numerous challenges, including low SES, although it is not considered to be failing (Elmore, 2003). This school has gone through quite a number of changes, including district consolidation and moving to a new, consolidated building, away from separate schools in each of the small communities which make up the school district. The principal, Mrs. Greene, was just completing her second year as principal at Steel Town Elementary school when I began my dissertation research there. The survey of teachers’ perceptions was completed at Steel Town Elementary School on the last day of work prior to the summer break. Students had been dismissed for summer break the day before the survey was completed.

### **6.1 ISOLATION**

Teacher isolation is a complex and widespread characteristic, with the potential to limit opportunities for individual professional growth (Flinders, 1998; Ingersoll, 2003; Lortie, 2002). Given the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, I felt drawn to investigate the influence of isolation on the development of internal accountability. In this chapter I draw from interview data to

show that there is evidence of teacher isolation and that the effects of teacher isolation can interfere with the development of shared expectations.

### **6.1.1 Physical Isolation**

Teachers at Steel Town Elementary shared with me some of their experiences with physical isolation. One teacher described feeling removed from interactions between the school administration and teachers. When asked “how do you think the administration views the teachers in this school?” the response was “I don’t see a lot that goes on, cause I’m not, you know, I’m not ... there.” Another participant, speaking of what goes on in other classrooms stated “I don’t know... what other people do in their classroom, cause I’m in my classroom and, you know, I’m not observing other teachers teaching, and seeing what they do or how they do it.” One teacher responded simply

“I wouldn’t mind working with someone else. It’s hard when you’re the only one in there.” “Are you by yourself most of the time?” “Yeah. It’s hard being the only person in there by yourself and then like, you... get all this work on top of it. Fill out these surveys, do this, do this test.” (In some situations, supplemental teaching support is not guaranteed) “Yeah, I have a ... person who comes in four days a week for Math and three days a week for Reading. Sometimes they would get pulled from me to substitute towards the middle of the year because we are short on coverage.”

As these data excerpts suggest, isolation remains a predominant trait of teaching, and this characteristic is a potential barrier to the successful implementation of reform initiatives. It is paradoxical that while teaching may have a high social content and involve significant

interaction with students, teaching can be lonely, with limited opportunities for discussion of one's work with others.

Teachers had a tendency to describe their work in terms of tasks that do not involve collaboration with other teachers, although an exception to this is found in descriptions by teachers involved with co-teaching classrooms. Also, teachers I interviewed seemed to have difficulty moving beyond the walls of their own classrooms as they described themselves and their professional roles, reminiscent of the cellular structure of schools, with a near total acceptance of isolation as part of the nature of teaching.

The demands caused by limited time may explain some teacher physical isolation, and this conceptualization overlaps with self-imposed isolation in that teachers may select to remain alone in their classroom during free time, or before or after school to work on lesson plans or complete required documentation. From this perspective it is understandable that teachers not only accept physical isolation, but also seek to maintain it.

### **6.1.2 Self Imposed Isolation**

Self imposed isolation has been described as an individual decision made in response to certain issues or problems that could affect the day to day operation of the classroom and/or school (Flinders, 1988). In a discussion of student behavioral support in the classroom, one veteran teacher expressed "I try to handle it myself, but there is a lot of behavioral support [available]. I have never really used any of the behavioral support. Maybe I shouldn't but I try to just handle it myself."

Another example of self imposed isolation can be seen in the description by a teacher, regarding seeking information on students' home life:

Things aren't like they used to be. Not all of them have a mom or dad that go to work every day or a mom at home; some of them *are* the mom to their little sisters or brothers and I need to be... But, I would be afraid of asking, and, you know, is that any of my business, so I don't. I don't pry into their... I may know just from a roster, like if a student had a different name, last name, but other than that, I feel like it is none of my business, but I probably should because I may approach that child differently if I knew that they were in a struggling situation.

This kind of comment is typical of an atomistic level of accountability. It is paradoxical to efforts implemented at Steel Town Elementary to bridge the isolation of teachers dealing with the often complicated lives of students, and how that *outside* status of children can directly influence their performance and abilities *inside* the classroom. One participant offered the following succinct comment: "Anything outside of this classroom... I'm oblivious to."

### **6.1.3 Isolation via limited diversity of experience**

Isolation is described by some interview participants as being a result of limited diversity of teachers' personal and professional experience. Across the school district, approximately 40% of the professional staff are graduates of the district. In the sample of Steel Town staff who participated in individual interviews as part of this research, the ratio of graduates of the district to participants who graduated from outside schools was 2:1. There was a mixed response with regard to how diversity of teachers' experience (and lack of diversity) is perceived as contributing to isolation. One interviewee commented:

if you have only known one school district, that is kind of just..., it is just not the best way to do things. You know, I have worked in other school systems too, and

it is very strange how people don't go outside to even drive outside their own community. They don't cross bridges.... There are people here who have never been to [the other side of the county]. They don't know... They might spend their whole life living in Roane [one of the communities that comprises STSD], and do not cross that bridge down there [referring to the bridge, which connects the valley to the larger metropolitan area].

Another participant shared:

I have had other experiences; I've been out and I've had the opportunity to see other places and I've seen and lived that. I think it gives you a different perspective on what you have and what you don't have... for so many of the folks here, because this is the only experience that they have, they don't recognize those things. People who have only known teaching in Steel Town, who grew up in Steel Town... their learning is all Steel Town driven.

Other participants perceived STSD graduates who became teachers in the district as strength. "I think it's good that we have that. I just think it's really good... it shows that people have succeeded through this... I mean, they want to come back." A similar comment reflects how knowledge of the community is viewed as desirable: "I think it's an advantage, you know. You know where people live... how they live." One teacher described this characteristic as "a kind of camaraderie, and I think that kind of creates a sense of community." Another person touched on the continuity of a community steeped in rich tradition: "I know the history. I have a brick on my desk; it's from the old school down the hill.... I have the brick because I went to school there and I taught there."

It is interesting that in the interviews I conducted, no one verbalized feeling that staff who did not grow up in the area or graduate from STSD were less effective in their jobs. When I asked one participant who did not grow up in the immediate area if there is a difference in how *outside* teachers are perceived by students, other teachers, or administrators, this person responded “I don’t think you are treated differently, no.”

#### **6.1.4 Autonomous Decision Making**

Autonomous decision making can be described as a bridge between the concepts of isolation and autonomy, as it may have characteristics of both isolation and autonomy. One teacher spoke of the autonomy teachers have in their own classroom: “we’re given the materials to do it, but we can do it in our own style. As long as we are able to, you know, get the kids to succeed.” Another teacher stated “I plan almost day-to-day, because just when you think you know what you are doing tomorrow, something happens.”

Autonomous decision making is evident in the words of a teacher talking about how her past experience with struggling students actually improved her skills in working with typical students:

Being with them (struggling students) for quite a long time, you start seeing where things are breaking down. I can look at any student a lot of times and just their facial expressions you can see it; they are not saying “I don’t get that, I don’t understand what she is actually trying to explain,” so that sometimes I just go over and say “okay let’s put this in a group together and let’s review it again,” and sometimes just reviewing it for the next couple of minutes and then they catch it.

Another veteran teacher, speaking of the value of professional experience shared, “There are different strategies that I’m aware of and I’ve become pretty quick at identifying students right away and then being able to assess... and then educate them properly.”

## **6.2 CO-TEACHING CLASSROOMS**

In response to recent legislation, along with trends supporting inclusive instruction for special education students along with greater access to the general education curriculum, many schools are implementing co-teaching as a means for providing effective instruction in inclusive classrooms.

Co-teaching classrooms have been implemented in the STSD and offer an opportunity to view collaborative decision making. In a co-teaching setting, two or more educators share instructional responsibility for a single group of students, to teach with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability. At Steel Town, teachers of students in grades 1-12 are participating in this venture, where they are collaborating and teaching together.

Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie (2007) identify and describe a number of co-teaching variations. These include:

- One teach, one assist, where one teacher (usually the general education teacher) assumes teaching responsibilities, and the special education teacher provides individual support as needed.
- Station teaching, where various learning stations are created, and the co-teachers provide individual support at the different stations.

- Parallel teaching, where teachers teach the same or similar content in different classroom groupings.
- Alternative teaching, where one teacher may take a smaller group of students to a different location for a limited period of time for specialized instruction.
- Team teaching (or interactive teaching), where both co-teachers share teaching responsibilities equally and are equally involved in leading instructional activities.

Co-teaching classrooms are included here (and in the section on collaboration), as it is the independent decision making of the co-teaching classroom teachers that is germane to this dissertation. A substantive inquiry into the dynamics of the co-teaching classroom or of the variations of co-teaching is beyond the scope of this research.

While I did not ask specifically about co-teaching classrooms, several interview participants are involved in co-teaching, and they offered information to educate me, along with sharing their perspectives on co-teaching and the autonomous decision making involved in this effort. Overall, interview participants involved in co-teaching had praise for the program. Teachers seem to feel strongly that co-teaching has a positive effect on students. One caution however is that participants were not asked to evaluate the success of the program in terms of student outcomes. Future research in this growing area could address *how* individual schools are able to develop and grow authentic collaborative partnerships, and the specific student gains that can be supported and achieved by this approach to teaching.

One teacher described the co-teaching classroom in this way: “It’s a good place, just seeing how students are supposed to act... and we celebrate everyone’s success. We see students

who are learning support being just as successful as typical students.” Teachers do have a say in decisions about which students are included in their co-teaching setting. “Say there is a student who is continually disruptive in a class... We try not to put them in a co-teaching room, just because of tantrums and... you know” (not all classrooms have co-teaching arrangements).

In the co-teaching classroom autonomy in decision making allows the co-teachers to focus on student strengths and student needs. “I have found that [my co-teacher] and I don’t even look at the children as ‘oh they have an IEP, oh they don’t,’ it’s ‘who needs us, who needs what?’

In addition to the co-teaching classrooms, STSD has been designated a Title 1 district. This means that Title 1 services, in the form of supplementary support for core subjects, can be offered to all students in a given class. As a result, the Title 1 support teacher comes into the classroom to provide assistance, as opposed to a “pull out” program, where eligible students leave the regular classroom for a class period to work with the Title 1 teacher. As my individual interviews did not include Title 1 teachers, I have relied on information provided by classroom teachers who spoke of their experience with the Title 1 drop-in arrangement.

### **6.3 AUTONOMY**

Utilizing Little’s (1990) distinction among prominent forms of collegiality as a framework for explication of the development of a continuum of collegial relations highlights a change, from conditions of near total independence to interdependence. As collegiality develops along the continuum, there is a shift in autonomy from exclusively individual to collective judgment. The forms of collegiality include: *storytelling*, *aid and assist*, *sharing* and *joint work*. I started from

an etic perspective, informed by Little's explication of forms of collegiality, which I used as a guide for classification of interview data. This was a helpful start. I soon found that my interpretation was being driven by distinctions which were identified by interview participants. In this way, the interpretation is a combination of both etic and emic perspectives. I believe this combination strengthens my interpretation as both perspectives have value, and each contributes something different (Patton, 2002).

### **6.3.1 Stories**

In the individual interviews I conducted, there were only a few stories shared by participants that fit the description provided by Little (1990), where "teachers satisfy the demands of daily classroom life by occasional forays in search of specific ideas, solutions, or reassurances" (p. 513). However, many of the interviewees spoke of informal opportunities that occur during the course of the day. One teacher spoke of the convenience of having grade-level classrooms located in the same hallway, and how these grade-level teachers are able to communicate easily throughout the day. Another participant spoke of teachers "catching each other on the fly", usually in the hallways before the start of the school day. A common lunch break was identified by one teacher as an opportunity utilized for informal teacher collaboration. "We eat together, so we collaborate informally, just during lunch or whatever."

Most of the interview participants identified their grade-level team meetings as the place where ideas and solutions are discussed. That is not to say that teachers don't gain information and assurance in informally exchanged stories, just that the more organized grade-level team was identified as the most common venue for sharing ideas and information. It is possible that the grade-level team has become the preferred opportunity for this kind of communication.

### 6.3.2

This conception equates collegiality with the availability of mutual aid or helping, and there were many examples in the interviews. There was also support for Little's assertion of a pervasive expectation among teachers, that colleagues will provide one another with help and advice when asked. One participant stated "one thing I like about being here is that if one of us is struggling, we help each other out." Another individual commented "I think at any time, I think any of the teams or teachers, you could go to and they would help you." Another teacher explained

We may just say "you know, I'm struggling with such and such, you know, can you help me out" and we might say "I have this idea, this is what I am doing", or if I taught math and I said "I'm struggling with teaching greatest common factor" or whatever, and someone might say "oh, this is what I do."

A concluding insight was offered by another interviewee "Everybody is more than willing to help someone else because at some point, you've had that student you can't reach, or just the discipline... no matter what you do, it doesn't work with them."

At the same time that there was strong identification from teachers with willingness to help when asked, there was also evidence in the interviews of careful preservation of the boundary between offering advice when asked, and interfering in another teacher's work. One educator stated: "I try not to step on any other toes; I don't feel like it is my place." Another teacher responded

"There are some excellent teachers and some mediocre teachers and sometimes you feel that when you have something to give, that you probably push it more toward the mediocre teacher than you would for an excellent teacher. So, I've done that a few times before, but most of the time it didn't go well at all."

This example may be a reflection of the problematic character of help-giving in a profession with a strong egalitarian tradition. A more typical response was given by another teacher who said: "I have to come here and work here every day, so I try to maintain a friendly atmosphere because I don't want any poor feelings or resentment." A powerful response, given by an interview participant when asked about the likelihood that they would offer un-asked for advice: "I would *never* do that!"

### **6.3.3 Help in times of crisis**

In the interviews I completed with professionals at Steel Town Elementary, I was struck by participant descriptions of another type of aid and assistance, where the school community works together to support individuals and families in crisis. One person stated: "We've had a lot of our... tragedies. A lot of...people really come together here. Like no other. Like, they're very... even though it's more of a distressed area, people are giving." Another participant responded: "it's amazing-- if something happens in someone's life, a tragedy or you know, whatever, we step to the plate as a team, like, it's unbelievable to see... 'What can I do, what do you need?' There is tremendous pride in these shared stories of help in times of crisis, pain and tragedy; one person described a "very strong ethic of caring... very strong that bonds us together here" while another spoke of how the staff "rose to the occasion beyond belief."

#### 6.3.4 Sharing

The *Sharing* conception of collegiality highlights the routine sharing of materials and methods, or the exchange of ideas and opinions. It is asserted that, through routine sharing, teaching is made less private, and the pool of ideas and methods is expanded. Little (1990) explains:

By making the ordinary materials of their work accessible to one another, teachers expose their ideas and intentions to others. Unlike periodic advice-giving, which tends to atomize and fragment teachers' grasp of their own and others' practice, widespread sharing may reveal an entire pattern of choices with regard to curriculum and instruction. (p. 518)

This stage shares some of the characteristics of the *Collective Expectations* level of internal accountability described by Ablemann & Elmore (1999), "The distinctive feature of expectations is that they are collective in nature-shared among individuals-although not necessarily with complete consensus among all the individuals in a school." (p. 140)

Although it sounds like common sense, offering the potential for harmonious exchange, sharing is quite variable in both form and in how it is received. Widespread sharing can lay the groundwork for discussion and dialogue regarding curriculum and instruction. One teacher stated: "There's a lot of working together. And I know that I'm willing to share anything for another teacher. Or, if I'm out at the store and I see something that I'm doing and I tell the other teachers "hey, you might be interested in this." Another educator spoke of taking only what he or she needs and leaving the rest for others "I ordered a set of [subject] centers last year. Well it turns out there is another set. They have a specialist that comes in, she came to me and said 'we

have another set, could you use another set?’ Why do I need another set? Let someone else have it.”

The grade-level team system at Steel Town Elementary, with regularly scheduled meetings may function as an optimal opportunity for sharing among teachers, at least at the same grade-level. This can be seen as a variation, in that teams are formalized groups within the structure of the organization. Teacher interviewees identified the grade-level team as the place where information and ideas are shared. One response touched on the isolation created by grade-level teams: “Unless you teach in that team you don’t get to see what they do.” Another teacher described how sharing occurs: “it’s more of... well, there’s a pocket here and a pocket there. Within a grade-level you might have two teachers who collaborate all the time, you know, share with each other, but not share within the whole grade-level team.”

Sharing ideas and resources is not always embraced by teachers. Various circumstances, including an isolating environment may lead to a protective stance over “a few good ideas.” One teacher indicated “I know there are some teachers that feel like ‘I’m doing this and I don’t want you to do this also.’ That’s one of the problems that... not everybody feels freely about sharing information and ideas.”

Several interview participants spoke of a macro level, regional professional development sharing day. This opportunity is made available to participating schools (Steel Town Elementary is a participant) through *Journey to Learn*, a professional development program sponsored annually by the Consortium for Public Education. The Journey to Learn program has teachers leaving their home school districts to learn and share with other educators across the region. The professional development day is intended to provide opportunities for teachers to gain additional knowledge and skill with instructional content, effective practice, classroom management, and

working with parents and the community. During the morning session, teachers leave their home school district to attend selected sessions, and in the afternoon they return to their home district for sharing and debriefing on their experience. *Journey to Learn* was described by several of the teachers I interviewed as quite helpful. In addition to attending the professional development day, several interview participants have developed topics in their own areas of interest and expertise, and presented to other teachers from other districts as part of the *Journey to Learn* experience.

### **6.3.5 Joint Work**

Joint work refers to encounters among teachers that rest on shared responsibility for the work of teaching (interdependence), collective conceptions of autonomy, support for teachers' initiative and leadership with regard to professional practice and group affiliations grounded in professional work. Here, collegiality *as* collaboration requires truly collective action – teachers' decisions to pursue a course of action in concert, or to decide on a set of priorities that guide the independent decisions of individual teachers. It is at this level that some of the commonly held beliefs about collaboration become problematic. Typical conceptions of professional autonomy are, or may be, threatened by joint work. Among the costs associated with collaboration are: loss of individual flexibility to act on personal preference, or to act on preference unexamined by and unaccountable to peers. Also, it is here that the demands of professional autonomy shift from individual to interpersonal; individual prerogative becomes subject to collectively developed values, standards and agreements.

Information from the individual interviews yielded two areas of interaction that reflect some, although not all of the qualifying characteristics of joint work. The first area is co-

teaching classrooms, and the second area is the groups that have come together to work on increasing understanding, experience and skill with a newly implemented mathematics curriculum. Several interview participants' comments touch on a shared responsibility for the work of teaching: "We share out a lot. It's like a learning process for the teachers, not only the kids this year." Another commented: "I mean, we just work together and um, if there is something new or something different we want to try, you know, we are both (referring to co-teacher) pretty open to 'hey, I'll try it; we'll see how it goes'."

Approximations of joint work are reflected in this description of the group working with integration of the new math curriculum: "Teachers want help... and we help each other too. Like, we're having a meeting tonight, which is good. We're bringing in concerns... assessment concerns... constructing the concept concerns." The comment of another participant sums up, I believe, the process of shifting from individual to interpersonal conceptions of autonomy: "I think for the most part, I think everybody, kind of, even if we don't get along all the time, still... respect each other. I mean 'cause I've seen some really great things that the teachers do."

Within this context, the concept of autonomy can be developed further by tying in the perspective of self-determination theory (SDT), which asserts that effective change in organizations occurs to the extent that the process through which change is facilitated allows for the satisfaction of individuals' basic needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness with respect to the change. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), opportunities to satisfy the three intrinsic needs will facilitate self-motivation and effective functioning because they enable the internalization of extant values, and help with adjustment, as need satisfaction enables growth and development (Ryan, 1995).

Self determination theory (SDT) is an approach to human motivation that highlights the importance of individuals' inner resources and defines needs in terms of the nutrients essential for survival and growth (Baard et al., 2004). Self determination theorists assert that psychological needs are essential for growth and well being, and that within education, opportunities to experience *competence*, *autonomy* and *relatedness* (each representing a basic psychological need) appear to be essential to promoting optimal growth and integration, and for constructive social development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Consistent with the working theory of internal accountability, self-determination theory asserts that effective change in organizations such as schools takes place to the extent that individuals in the organization have internalized its importance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Further, this internalization can occur only when the nature of the change and the process through which it is facilitated allow for the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2004).

Within SDT, the need for competence refers to success at optimally challenging tasks and being able to achieve desired outcomes. The need for autonomy refers to experiencing choice and feeling like the initiator of one's actions. Relatedness refers to a need for establishing a sense of mutual respect and reliance with others.

#### **6.4 INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

The insight gained from the exploration of isolation and autonomy can be used as a contextual framework for a reflection of the three levels of internal accountability. Deeper understanding may result from a review of interview data that may represent each of the levels of internal

accountability. The working theory of internal accountability identifies a three tiered system of internal accountability.

#### **6.4.1 Atomistic**

In this baseline, or default level of internal accountability, individual responsibility dominates. Internal accountability is weak, characterized by atomization. As stated earlier, one of the interview participants succinctly stated, “anything outside of this classroom, a lot of times I’m oblivious to.” Another participant, when asked “What about all the students in the school – do you feel a sense of responsibility?” replied “Honestly, I never really thought about that... I don’t feel like it is my place.” One teacher expressed frustration that her own work ethic was not apparent in the work of other teachers: “It’s just frustrating because I know there may be, and I’m sure there are teachers that don’t give and don’t do what I do, but I do. And I take it personal. You know, as much as I try not to, I do.” Although there is a personal sense of responsibility, and a frustration with the perception that other teachers are not fully invested or productive, the individual sense of responsibility has not progressed to a level of shared expectations. This atomistic stance is evident in the comment made by a teacher speaking of responsibility outside of one’s own classroom: “So you know, if I see something good or bad, I will speak up. Because I’m the adult there. That’s my responsibility. That’s what I feel internally.” Another teacher, speaking of the mindset of teacher colleagues indicated that “most people are pretty open. Some aren’t. Some are, in their own way, set in stone and can’t change their thinking.”

### **6.4.2 Emergence of Collective Accountability**

The second tier of internal accountability includes strong mutual expectations. Here, a powerful culture of expectations can be observed that shapes individual views around a common purpose. With the development of strong mutual expectations, teachers' work is influenced by the expectations of others. In the interviews I conducted, many participants stated they do not feel a sense of shared responsibility or mutual expectations for student learning. One teacher explained: "I'm going to say no but if we were sitting there saying 'my kids aren't getting this or how do you teach this', we do do a good job at sharing out. 'This is what I do in my room', or 'here I've made this paper', and we do as a team share very well." Another educator shared a different perspective: "um, the teachers have to change, and they're starting to believe in this new stuff [math program]. You can see it."

### **6.4.3 Full Internal Accountability**

This tier represents an alignment of responsibility, expectations and accountability. In the first tier, individual conceptions of responsibility, and in the second tier, collective expectations tend to guide teachers' actions. Schools at the third level have managed to transform individual responsibility and collective expectations into a system of internal accountability reflecting an alignment of personal responsibility and collective expectations. This alignment of expectations is also accompanied by some sense that there will be consequences if expectations aren't met (Ablemann & Elmore, 1999). While I did not find strong evidence of full internal accountability, one participant offered this description: "well, first, I think you have to have good leaders that show by example. I think you have to have um, accountability and dedicated people that not

only like what they do, but they have to be... I think you have to enjoy what you do, but I think it has to start from the top and it has to be a model down. It has to be accountability, and everybody has to have consistency.”

It is likely that there are other initiatives within the school which reflect internal accountability; however this chapter is limited to findings based on data from individual interviews. One area, differentiated instruction, was frequently identified as a professional development initiative that has been successfully implemented in all areas of student instruction. This was a school-wide goal for the past two years:

to try to better develop our instruction to meet the needs of all learners inside of the classroom. Usually most of our professional development over the past two years has been spent on giving the teachers different strategies to use in their classroom, educating them on what DI is, and also giving them the chance to go to each other’s classrooms and do walkthroughs and visit just so that they can steal ideas from others.

One teacher described how initially, many were uncomfortable with the idea of implementing differentiated instruction

like I said before, we do...we all do what we are supposed to be doing. (With) differentiated instruction, many of us were uncomfortable with it, it was new to us. Did any of us say no I’m not doing it? No. Every single one of us took it upon ourselves to do what we needed to do to implement it into our classroom.” Informal collegial helping emerged as teachers worked to learn and implement differentiated instruction techniques. “So really I think what we found out was that probably all of us said I can’t do this, but then when we collaborated

and said” I tried this” I would have said “oh, I have done that, is that differentiate... oh you are already doing it.” I don’t think we all realized on an everyday basis we were doing it already. Not as much as we are now. Now I can list a hundred strategies for DI where before I could probably have listed three.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a professional development initiative is beyond the scope of this research; however professional development is “at the center of the practice of improvement” (Elmore, 2004, p. 130). In this instance it appears that the differentiated instruction initiative was clearly and directly related to the goals of the school for improving student achievement.

#### **6.4.4 Constructive Controversy**

Conflict between individuals over professional beliefs and practices is likely to be a part of the change process, whether that change is toward the development of internal accountability or in some other direction. Past research on teacher professional communities has often offered a description of communities easily able to arrive at a group consensus, under-emphasizing the complexity of developing a community while simultaneously acknowledging diversity of beliefs, preferences experience and practices. Understanding conflict is critical to developing a deeper understanding of how groups come together, cope, and how they are sustained over time (Achinstein, 2002). The data here suggest suggests there is some disagreement however; this does not mean working toward internal accountability is not a good idea.

While there is a common misperception that conflict will inevitably lead to hostility, divisiveness and bad feelings among participants, within a cooperative context constructive controversy can contribute to greater understanding. Two essential skills for constructive

controversy are: 1) the ability to disagree with another person's ideas while preserving their personal competence, and 2) perspective taking, where individuals actively strive to understand others' perspectives. Making a commitment to the use of these skills can help facilitate high quality problem solving. This type of constructive controversy also requires that cooperation among individuals dominates the context; individuals need to have the ability to criticize the ideas of another while preserving their sense of competence and worth (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000). It is important to develop an appreciation of the interpersonal dynamic involved in controversy, as engaging in constructive controversy offers opportunities for learning and growth. It may also help balance or minimize the risk of groupthink – individuals going along with group decisions without questioning (Achinstein, 2002). Open communication and constructive controversy may be key to the growth of professional communities and internal accountability.

## **6.5 ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT?**

Formal external accountability systems are based on the assumption that schools should be held accountable for student academic performance. At the school level the question of purpose is more complex. To assess a sense of purpose, interview participants in this study were asked “For what are you accountable?” The responses to this question are important, as they have implications for how teachers view *to whom* and *how* they are accountable.

Responses were clustered around several themes. The most frequent response was high-stakes tests. “Test results, yeah. I hate to say that I go off of test results, but if you ask any

teacher, they're going to tell you it's all about test results." Another teacher responded "Oh, um I hate saying it, but test results are huge."

Another type of response was: "Since most of the students, at least in \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ grades know who I am, I do feel a little bit more responsible for making sure that everybody feels safe, everybody feels that if there is something that is happening... that they can express that to me and I would know the correct channels or the way to go with that information."

Another theme was identified as student achievement: "(take students from) the level that they are at and pushing them to the next level."

## **6.6 ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM?**

A majority of interview participants responded that they feel accountable to their students. Even when external mandates were also mentioned (high-stakes tests), these participants talked about their responsibility to their students and to themselves.

One respondent reported: "I feel I'm accountable to administration because my job is to make them look better. If I don't do that then the school doesn't look good." Responses to this question did not clearly tap into the emergence of shared expectations that was observed in other areas.

## 6.7 WORK ENVIRONMENT

Work environment is a category I have developed as a place to describe some of the areas of apprehension within the school. These points of apprehension were identified by interview participants, and may be affecting the growth of more productive efforts toward strong internal accountability. Although I focus here on identified unease, participants also had many positive things to say about the work environment at Steel Town Elementary. One educator shared “I think that as a district we all work together for a common goal to better the kids, their education.” Another said to me “You’ve been here. You see... its low key. I mean, this isn’t bad. It isn’t. You can walk around.” A similar response from another participant: “I like it here. It’s not, um, a stress... I don’t find it to be stressful.” One teacher described how a positive work environment is worth more than money:

I like my job. I love the kids I work with. And I’ve been in other schools where I might make more money, but if I’m unhappy every day, I don’t know if it’s worth it. I mean, I’ve discussed that with a couple of teachers, we’ve discussed it at lunch a few times and we’ve all said the same thing. It’s like; it would be great to make more money, of course. I would love more money, believe me. But um, at the same time, I don’t want to go home and be unhappy every day and... I really do truly enjoy my job.

One area of apprehension described to me in the interviews is unease with the direction of some recent initiatives. Speaking of the in-school student mental health services programs one educator expressed concern about students being pulled from classroom instruction “whether we have Reading or Math or whatever. They go and we can’t say no and I just cringe. But I can’t say anything, they have to go. And I like I said, I know kids have issues, but you know

what... um, you have to balance it somewhere. ... they do this during school and I'm totally against that."

Another participant described a personal concern/ambivalence regarding the constructivist Math program which is being implemented on a rolling basis in the elementary school. I believe this description highlights both the tension and complexity involved in undertaking dramatic change.

Mrs. West is a seasoned elementary teacher with a strong record of success teaching elementary Math. She described to me some of the behind the scenes work on the part of the classroom teacher that goes into helping ensure students' grade level success, including aligning student skills with the grade level eligible content of state standards and with the curriculum. In this way, by seeing the synoptic view, it is possible to make sure students get the skills that are necessary to move on.

Mrs. West described the new math series as "so new and different... it's a kick in the butt." There is concern on numerous levels. One expressed concern is that the program is regimented and scripted. "You know, we're on the same page. Literally." One recent day, Mrs. West felt that her students needed more time to grasp the Math concept being taught. "I needed another day to... Nope, you have to move on...so...you know what...moving on." Another concern is that the new math program involves more material than can be covered in a school year; "we'll never get through the whole series for the year. There's just too much. So you have to keep moving."

Mrs. West also questioned the (Administrative) decision to change from a traditional Mathematics approach to a Constructivist approach. She explained that student success, measured by the PSSA (state standardized test), was quite high with the traditional approach, and

that with the new Math program “there’s just so much and obviously it takes longer to explain something than it is just to learn the algorithm of carrying and borrowing.” When I asked if she felt there is evidence that the new approach offers a better foundation for later success with Algebra and other higher Math, Mrs. West responded “I don’t know. My jury is out.”

Tension was evident as Mrs. West described her compliance with teaching the new Math program while at the same time “I’m starting to worry.” She described how some of her students are “real high functioning with reading,” and with high scores on standardized reading assessments, but with dismal Math scores. As an initial step in considering whether to refer students to a gifted program, Mrs. West completed a preliminary matrix, which added to her concern. Although the high functioning student reading scores ranged from 3 to 8 years above grade level, their Math achievement scores ranged from below grade level to grade level. “When you have a student (elementary school student) in 11<sup>th</sup> grade in Reading, you... in my years of experience... you rarely have someone with that big of a span. Already, to me, that’s a red flag.”

However, “we’re in it. It’s bought. We’re here.” Mrs. West continued with a resigned sigh “and I’m just told what to do, so I don’t have any flexibility this year with the Math at all.”

Tension is not limited to teachers and administrators. For example, the relationship between Steel Town Elementary and the Steel Town school board was identified as an area where tension is problematic. There is a perception that elementary school issues are not seen as important: “they’re kind of like ‘aw the elementary takes care of themselves’ and as long as we don’t have parents knocking down their door saying ‘I hate those people they’re so... you know what I mean.’ It’s disappointing that we don’t see...support from our board; they don’t recognize how much we have going on. Because even though you talk and try to tell them, they don’t hear, they don’t hear what you’re saying.”

Another reported tension involving the school board (directly or indirectly), is in the area of compensation. This is viewed as political tension: “Politics is definitely one reason why some people have left. They get a better offer and they go.”

## **6.8 ADMINISTRATION–TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS**

One area of frustration, and, perhaps disappointment, expressed by the administration is a perceived lack of understanding about the school-based behavioral health program: “sometimes I don’t really think that even the staff realizes how huge it is. I think the reason that they don’t see it that way is because it’s not a program that they necessarily have to implement, it’s a program that is a service to them and to their kids.”

Another tension, described as a struggle, involves reluctance on the part of staff to share *Something to Celebrate* about their students, their classrooms or themselves, during staff meetings. “I’m going to keep asking ... What they gave me last year was ‘we’re not ever told enough how wonderful we are.’ Well you toot your own horn.” *Something to Celebrate* may have been initiated as a result of “reflections that the staff did ... last year and there were staff members who felt, no, they very much felt that they were not appreciated and that their alternatives were not looked at.”

## 6.9 TEACHER-ADMINISTRATION RELATIONSHIPS

In describing the interaction between teachers and administration, one participant offered the following observation:

They could give...I get...I call them twirlers...people who um...they twirl around and they're telling ... this stuff and they're going on and on...and they shut that door and...Ooohh...you know, what you're saying is not what I'm getting... You know it's so cute. And then you think Ohhh, got the twirlers out there... But, I...the administration, I think, needs to go in and see what's going on. They have them hoodwinked too, a little bit. You know, because the twirlers do look good.

Several participants spoke of tension generated by administrative turnover: "Sometimes I think morale is not one of our strong points in this district. We keep getting so many new people and that sometimes there hasn't been enough time to really, you know, work everything out."

Another added:

Well, those (professional relationships) change actually a lot with sometimes you know how the school, you know like we usually change principals every 3 to 5 years. It is very weird how this happens, but you know it just happens a lot and that in the end... They just don't stay a long time in one thing. It's just something that happens and that in the end affects, you know, the way things are going to be operating differently under different people.

Tension is reflected in the words of a teacher expressing a feeling that teachers aren't treated as professionals: "treat us to the point where we are the people, we know what we're

doing. Yes, please give us suggestions if you see something that should be, but you know we are capable of performing our jobs, you know, and doing what we feel is best for the students.”

## **6.10 TEACHER–TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS**

In describing relationships between teachers, one interview participant spoke of the destructive influence of a small number of teachers:

if you just get very strong personalities, they are hard to get along with and they think they can control things. It’s hard to work with and do things with them and that is, in my time here, happened quite a bit. It has not been easy at times. We have had some principals and there has been staff and faculty been able to do, like make up things on their own, like when they can have duties and stuff. There was too much control for teachers. Some teachers assumed too much power, they think they are mini-principals and you know.

A different type of teacher/teacher unease is captured in teacher descriptions of others’ lack of professional performance: “Some just don’t care. They just literally come for the paycheck. You know, they will do absolutely nothing before school or after, you know, or in the summer.” “People just want to be a page turner...go from this page to the next page and nothing more, nothing less. Go home at 4 o’clock and that’s all there is.”

A similar description by one teacher of some others: “I always go back to the thing... I’ve worked in the real world. They don’t get it. They don’t get it, you know. ‘Oh, we have to do this now’ and ‘oh, we have to do that.’ Well, yeah it’s your job. What are you going to do? There’s a plus. You don’t like it, there’s the door.”

Unease was also evident in reports by teachers of others' incompetence: "but some of the rooms - they're not doing what they need to be doing. Honestly... I feel, in some of the rooms, the instruction is lacking: it's not being presented. There are classrooms that I would not want my children to be in, because I never know...."

## **6.11 ROLE OF PRINCIPAL**

The role of the administrator in the process of the development of internal accountability in schools is essential, as it is this position that is pivotal in bringing together "the shared norms, values, expectations, structures, and processes that determine the relationship between individual actions and collective results in schools" (Elmore, 2003, p. 203). In this section I describe some of the functions of the Steel Town Elementary school administration, with particular attention to decision making, expectations, and accountability. It is through this lens that I also describe the growth of efforts toward strong internal accountability, along with some of the challenges that have been encountered. The success of increasing student achievement for all children will require strong leadership to pull together the resources necessary to change the way a school operates.

When the interviews for this study were conducted, Mrs. Greene (pseudonym) was beginning her third year as principal of Steel Town Elementary School. Mrs. Greene is not a graduate of the Steel Town School District, although a very strong majority of the people with whom I completed individual interviews are graduates of this school district. Prior to becoming principal of Steel Town Elementary, Mrs. Greene was a principal in a rural school district in

another area (same State). Before becoming a principal, for 13 years, Mrs. Green was an elementary teacher in the school district from which she graduated.

Mrs. Greene shared with me her philosophy of education as an elementary administrator: “taking care of the whole child.” Mrs. Greene’s individual personal responsibility is revealed in this statement: “the bottom line is when I lay down at night or when I get up in the morning I say “the decisions I made while I was at work; they were in the best interest of the kids. I hold to that.” Mrs. Greene also spoke of “doing what is in the best interest of the kids” as she explained how, since being appointed principal of Steel Town elementary, the school has been able to start a program to provide school-based mental health services to students. “We have a lot of kids coming in with diagnoses and behavior issues... I saw a need, a student need and that’s what drove me to do what we’re doing.” “That’s what drove us (administrators) to say “look, it’s right in front of us; what are we going to do about it? We can pretend it’s not there but it is there... so I think it just forced us to push ahead, because it’s a different part of the job. It’s not academics, it’s not really leading your teachers, it’s not at all that piece of it; it is taking care of a whole child”. She continued: “That’s what it is. It’s the piece that people often feel isn’t important, yet that could be the very barrier; (why) the kid is never successful. No one has ever dealt with what he has had to deal with, either inside or outside of the school walls.” Offering a comparison to other districts’ elementary programs, Mrs. Greene stated: “I can tell you, they’re not doing what we’re doing.”

As a result of the typical organizational structure of schools, administrators are the obvious people to whom teachers are accountable. At the same time, administrators are excluded from the basic teacher-student relationship, which is the foundation upon which the work of schools is based, and this may explain why many teachers mentioned accountability to

administrators only occasionally and even then only after identifying students or themselves. Because teachers have less interaction with administrators and a lot of interaction with their students, it is understandable that their sense of accountability to administrators is weaker than their sense of responsibility to their students. However, weak internal accountability combined with weak expectations can result in teachers following their own individual sense of responsibility. This was reflected in the words of Mrs. Greene as she spoke of how expectations are communicated to the staff: “a lot of it is done through the evaluation process, staff meetings, beginning of the year staff binders, the district’s mission, etc... Even with all of that, we still have a lot of work to do in this area. What I have found is if you don’t give them the information they will create it. That usually does not yield a positive outcome for us.”

Although there is still work to be done in the areas of developing, communicating, and strengthening expectations, Mrs. Greene has been successful in establishing herself as a dynamic leader and change agent. This principal is building relationships and supporting the development of shared expectations. She has been instrumental in encouraging a team approach to problem solving and sharing. Mrs. Greene utilizes the annual teacher evaluation process to hold teachers accountable for not meeting expectations. Mrs. Greene stated to me that several teachers directly expressed their support for her leadership: “You hold us accountable.” “It’s not just words, if we’re not doing it, it reflects in our evaluation.” She added that some teachers have said to her “it wasn’t until you started giving N’s or U’s that people started doing things differently.” This is a very different stance from what was described by one long-term employee as how the school was run in the past: “the teachers basically ran the school. So, it’s kind of hard to get away.” Another educator struck a similar chord “and, like we have had some principals and there has been staff and faculty been able to do – like make up things on their own, like when they can

have duties and stuff. There was too much control for teachers. Some teachers assumed too much power, they think they are mini-principals and you know... there was a lack of professionalism, cliques, we get a lot of that in schools... if you just get very strong personalities they are hard to get along with and they think they can control things. It's hard to work with and do things with them and that has, in my time here, happened quite a bit. It has not been easy at times." I was told in the interviews that Mrs. Greene is the first administrator at Steel Town elementary who has ever given any teacher evaluation that was less than "S" (Satisfactory). Mrs. Greene spoke of making a commitment to providing genuine feedback, reflective of performance that meets, or does not meet expectations. There has been some opposition to this "new" evaluation procedure: "You know some of these people have been doing this job for 20-30 years; no one has ever told them their performance was less than satisfactory. Who's this young pup (from) out of the area to come in and tell us?"

It takes time to see the results of changes to curriculum, instruction and new leadership. Along with growth and team building efforts, significant challenges remain constant. Change is also anticipated in school funding, as Pennsylvania recently elected a new Governor who ran on a platform of fiscal responsibility; balancing the state budget without increasing state taxes. How this will affect the Steel Town School District remains to be seen, although this district along with others in financially distressed communities are more vulnerable to fluctuations in state allocations than school districts in more affluent communities (McNulty, 2011).

## **7.0 REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND A NEW DIRECTION**

### **7.1 SUMMARY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how internal accountability develops in schools and how teachers think about accountability issues, with a goal of expanding understanding of the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of strong internal accountability and, with this contribution, to expand the working theory of internal accountability.

My research is an investigation of the influence of isolation and autonomy on the development of internal accountability, as a way of increasing understanding of internal accountability as a means of achievement of a reconfiguration of responsibility in education in the current era of high-stakes testing. The study focused on teachers and schools and how they construct their own structures of accountability. I am particularly interested in how schools move from individual, atomistic responsibility to a level of shared responsibility. These concepts are explored in a literature regarding how isolation became prominent in education.

I strongly believe that internal accountability can help schools weather the current crisis of high stakes testing and external mandates. However, internal accountability is much more than a single approach to help schools improve student performance on high-stakes tests. This approach offers a potential opportunity for teachers and administrators in schools to work

together to develop strategies for improving teaching and learning within the framework of mutual understanding and shared expectations.

In this study I make a distinction between autonomy as a type of isolation and autonomy as an essential need which must be met in order for authentic change to occur. My analysis attempts to move beyond internal accountability as a condition to support standards-based reform via high-stakes tests, and highlights autonomy as a critical human need. I also believe it is possible to come on too strongly, and inadvertently sabotage one's own efforts. If internal accountability is pushed aggressively as an alternative to the current system, instead of being introduced as a complimentary addition to it, there is a risk of scaring people; making them think that by considering the development of internal accountability, they're doing something risky. Success with gaining acceptance of this model may lie in the approach.

In this individual case study, purposeful sampling was used for selection of a school study site. In addition to information on the 42 public school districts in Allegheny County, PA, which I gleaned from extensive review of public records, I also relied on the expert advice and guidance of a member of my dissertation committee who has extensive experience and knowledge of the Allegheny County school districts. I used Elmore's (2003) description of "target" schools: schools facing multiple challenges, but that had not been declared failing.

Teachers of students in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 were selected for the study. I chose these grades, as this is when required PSSA testing starts. I elected to focus on elementary schools, as, although they operate under systems of external accountability, elementary schools are less likely to have the fragmentation into subject-based departments more typical of middle schools and high schools. Also, with elementary grades, there is a more directly accessible relationship between

teachers and their students, as students have not yet accumulated a history of school success or failure of many prior years.

To answer my research question, my study involved two phases: an online survey and individual face-to-face interviews. The survey provided an opportunity to collect data on teachers' perspectives on school and district leadership; perceptions of external accountability systems; shared expectations for student learning; teachers' assessment of their influence over student learning; and the school's capacity to support teachers' instructional practice. Interviews were audio-recorded, and later transcribed. During the face-to-face interviews I shared preliminary interpretations, conducted member checks (Maxwell, 2005), and invited questions from participants.

## **7.2 INTERPRETATION**

In this final chapter I synthesize the data described in the previous three chapters and use this to help expand the working theory of internal accountability.

### **7.2.1 Isolation**

Teacher isolation has been present from the very start of public education in the United States. Seen as a condition of the work of teaching helps to complicate understanding of isolation as a product of institutional characteristics, which, in my opinion is the more typical view. This perspective highlights the historical picture of isolation, and includes cellular organization, high

turnover, and changing demographics, where isolation is situated inside common characteristics of schools.

While this conceptualization is both important and necessary, it is an incomplete explanation of the complexity of isolation. A view of isolation being situated within the individual, continuously shaped by information and experiences is more consistent with a constructivist model of continuous adaptation to changing conditions, and, I believe, more completely reflects the broad influence of isolation on contemporary educational settings. This view allows for a more comprehensive understanding of isolation as a dynamic potential and not just a static, influencing factor.

Appreciation of ways in which isolation can be seen as an adaptive strategy is enlightening, and offers a contrasting view of why some seek and actively strive to maintain isolation. This perspective of isolation-as-adaptation brings the interaction of subject and object to the foreground. The image is of humans engaging with their world. There is no true or valid interpretation. Meanings emerge from the subject's interaction with the object.

I am struck by the variability of the potential influence of isolation, and how, within a given context, what looks autonomous may be more like isolation. Evidence of the variability of strength and intensity has increased my understanding that these are not "all or none" influences.

### **7.2.2 Autonomy**

Teacher autonomy is based on freedom from scrutiny, the right to exercise personal preference, and tolerance of individual preferences of others. Distinguishing between various types of collegial relations and their effect on autonomy may be key to explaining the consequences of this dynamic.

My research findings have generated insight into the area of autonomy, which I use to expand the working theory of internal accountability. Autonomy does not appear to be perceived by Steel Town Elementary School teachers as a strong characteristic. A majority of teachers feel they are not involved prior to important decisions being made, which speaks to a perception of decision-making as external to teachers, either individually or collectively.

By a wide margin, teachers see locus of control as external. Locus of control taps into teachers' perceived control over their behavior. As an example, when asked to identify what they believe is the main reason scores on the PSSA, the state high-stakes test, is not higher, twice as many teachers cite outside causes as inside causes. By causes, I mean outcomes which are perceived to be either internally controlled by the teacher's own volition, or dependent on factors external to themselves. Similarly, when asked about the second most important explanation for why the PSSA scores were not higher, more than twice as many teachers identified external causes.

Paradoxically, all of the teacher participants in this study indicated they think teachers at Steel Town Elementary School have what it takes to get children to learn. Similarly, more than three quarters of those surveyed believe they and their colleagues have shared beliefs and values about the central mission of the school.

Teachers in this study perceive an external locus of control over their work, without latitude to act on their own, or to influence important decisions. At the same time, they believe teachers at this school have the capacity to teach students successfully, and that colleagues share common values and beliefs about the central mission of the school. These areas suggest that teachers see themselves as having little power as far as autonomous decision making or input on important decisions made that will have an effect on them and their classroom.

Within the conceptualization of autonomy as a form of isolation, there is a connotation of destructiveness. Common conceptions of autonomy are threatened by development of a collegial environment of shared expectations, as genuine collaboration involves the loss of individual prerogative to act on one's ideas without responsibility or accountability to peers (Little, 1990). As collegial interaction in schools has gained popularity in the literature on education reform and school improvement, notions of autonomy, tied in with isolation are left unexamined.

This is where understanding of how internal accountability develops breaks down. Although the progression from an atomistic, individual responsibility to an interdependent, shared responsibility is thought to move along a continuum, there is no explication in the literature of what becomes of teacher autonomy as mutual expectations replace individual notions of accountability.

Teacher participants in my research spoke of personal autonomy in a variety of ways. One teacher expressed an autonomous stance with students "I don't care how you do it, as long as you understand what you're doing", while another teacher described a different approach: "I'm not easy. I am hard and I am strict, but when I thought back on my education the teachers who made the biggest difference in my life were the teachers who were hard, who were strict, who expected us to do better, who passed back the sloppy writing and made us redo it." A different conception of autonomy was expressed to me as a teacher's personal philosophy; that parent, teacher and child all have to communicate: "if you don't have that as your foundation, you know, if one of those breaks down, then you're kind of ...doomed." Another teacher described to me how accountability is demonstrated through test results: "I hate to say that I go off of test results, but if you ask any teacher, they're going to tell you it's... all about test

results.” The teacher continued: “but, you know, I think there has to be more of a holistic approach instead of just scores.”

While autonomy does not seem to be addressed as part of movement along a continuum, or as part of the shift from individual responsibility to shared expectations, it does appear in the words and descriptions shared by teachers. These examples are only a few of many instances of autonomy described to me by teachers in interviews. Based on this research, I strongly believe that teacher autonomy is an area previously overlooked, which may be necessary for the successful development of shared responsibility and expectations.

Consideration of autonomy as a need is part of the framework of self determination theory (Baard et al., 2004; Ryan 2009), which maintains that within school reform efforts, recognition of autonomy, along with two other basic needs: relevance and connectedness, is essential for internalization of importance needed for effective change. In order for this to happen, the nature of the change and the process through which change is introduced must allow for the satisfaction of these needs with respect to the desired change. This perspective fits well with the notion of development of internal accountability. A school that supports teachers’ need for autonomy, along with relatedness and competence will smooth the way toward achievement of shared expectations. As I learned from listening to the stories of teachers who participated in my research project, it became apparent to me that autonomy had not been adequately addressed, and this is where I began to direct my research – toward an area where I saw potential for increasing understanding of how shared expectations develop along the journey toward internal accountability.

### 7.3 LIMITATIONS

All research designs can be discussed in terms of their relative strengths and limitations. There are several limitations to this study, most of which are limitations of my research design. I selected case study as it afforded me a means of investigating complex social units with multiple variables of potential value in understanding the research problem.

Possibly because a case study focuses on a single unit, the issue of generalizability looms larger here than it does with other types of qualitative research; however, there is much that can be learned from a single case. Through narrative description I have tried to create an image: a vivid portrait of isolation, autonomy and internal accountability at Steel Town Elementary School. Even though this is a single case study of one elementary school, it provides a deeper understanding of the role of isolation and autonomy in the development of internal accountability.

What can be learned from this case may be transferred to similar situations. It is up to the reader, not the researcher who makes the determination of what may apply to their own context. As Stake (2005, p. 255) explains:

researchers will, like others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationships—and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape—reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it... more likely to be personally useful.

## 7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this research project support the need for additional in-depth examination of the role of autonomy in the development of strong internal accountability. Further research could aid in determining essential steps required to develop internal accountability, and then, how preserving a sense of autonomy can enable this growth.

Recommendations for future research include expanding this study to other types of elementary schools. It is quite possible that different outcomes may be seen within the contexts of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Expanded research into other areas could support the findings of this study, or they may inform the reader of a need for greater

Within a school district or school, the results of the current study could be used to launch a research investigation into encouragement of shared expectations by support for teacher autonomy. Various approaches could be piloted to gauge efficacy of efforts to support autonomy. Teacher input for this type of effort would be a solid start to encourage autonomy and shared responsibility.

Additionally, I would recommend expanding the research to middle schools and high schools, both within the Steel Town School District as well as beyond this district. Since middle schools and high schools tend to be more complex organizations than primary schools, the role of teacher autonomy may be different in different settings as well as in different types of schools. The organizing principles of high schools as departmentalized units differ from elementary and middle school environments in their mission and structure. One of the most dominant concerns of high schools noted by Carnoy, Elmore, and Siskin (2003) is “the polarization of high school outcomes—increased dropouts at one end and increased college attendance for high school graduates at the other end” (p. 2).

Even within Steel Town Elementary School, there are implications for more research. If this study were to be extended, my next step would be to initiate direct observations and seek immersion in the school setting in order to see from the inside how people carry out their activities on a daily basis, what is important to them, and what they find meaningful. This opportunity would offer additional perspectives for greater understanding of internal accountability along with increased potential for deepening understanding about internal accountability. Additional theoretical lenses, including social network analysis could then be used as a framework for understanding how teacher interactions influence and are influenced by internal accountability.

As the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind is presently overdue, and with President Barak Obama and other government leaders calling for a major overhaul of this legislation, future research may yield a different understanding of internal accountability within a context of high-stakes tests. Finally, with extreme state budget cuts facing education in the state of Pennsylvania, replicating this study in two years may yield additional valuable insights.

In this study I have taken one concept; internal accountability, which I was introduced to in Ablemann and Elmore's landmark study (1999), and I have expanded the working theory by my focus on how schools move from an atomistic, individual responsibility to a level where shared expectations and mutual responsibility are dominant.

**APPENDIX A**

**IRB APPROVED PROTOCOL**



**University of Pittsburgh**  
***Institutional Review Board***

3500 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
(412) 383-1480  
(412) 383-1508 (fax)  
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

**Memorandum**

To: Veronica Kozar  
From: Sue Beers PhD, Vice Chair  
Date: 6/14/2010  
IRB#: [PRO10030347](#)  
Subject: Developing Internal Coherence in Schools: A Case-study Inquiry into the Influence of Isolation and Autonomy

The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above referenced study by the expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110. Your research study was approved under:

45 CFR 46.110.(6)

45 CFR 46.110.(7)

Approval Date: 6/14/2010

Expiration Date: 6/13/2011

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)].

The IRB Reference Manual (Chapter 3, Section 3.3) describes the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

The protocol and consent forms, along with a brief progress report must be resubmitted at least one month prior to the renewal date noted above as required by FWA00006790 (University of Pittsburgh),

FWA00006735 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center), FWA00000600 (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh),

FWA00003567 (Magee-Womens Health Corporation), FWA00003338 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cancer Institute).

**Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.**

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. How many years have you been teaching?
  - a. What grades/subjects have you taught?
  - b. In what other schools/school districts have you taught?
  - c. Number of years in this district/school?
2. What is your vision for a good school?
  - a. When I leave this school I would like to be remembered for...
  - b. I want my school to become a place where ...
  - c. The kind of school I would like my own children to attend would ...
  - d. The kind of school I would like to teach in ...
3. What, would you say is the purpose of public education?
4. To whom are you accountable?
5. For what are you accountable?
6. How is accountability demonstrated?
7. How do you view your relationship with other educators and personnel in the school?
8. Without giving identifying information, can you tell me with whom you collaborate?
9. How do you see yourself as responsible for student learning?
  - a. Students in your classroom

- b. Students in the school
10. How do teachers communicate within the school?
11. What is the principal's role in this school?
- a. Describe the importance of the principal's role
  - b. Describe the value of the principal's role
12. I'd like to understand the professional development focus of this school. Tell me about professional development here.
- a. Pedagogy
  - b. Subject matter
  - c. Technology
  - d. Behavioral Support
  - e. Other
13. Can you tell me about the professional community in this school?
- a. What kind of place is this?
  - b. Who's the community?
14. While schools have many similarities, they also have unique characteristics. I would like to understand some of the individual features of this school.

General perceptions of competence

Administrators of teachers

Teachers of Administration

Teachers of teachers

Administrators of administrators

15. Can you describe what you see as the educational challenges faced by your school and district?
16. What is the professional environment? Is it different from the professional community?
  - a. Collegial
  - b. Collaborative
  - c. Social
17. How do you plan?
  - a. Lesson plans?
  - b. Who do you give them to?
18. Tell me about professional development
  - a. School/district sponsored
  - b. Any on your own?
19. How did you decide to become a teacher?
20. That covers the things I wanted to ask. Is there anything you care to add?
21. What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

## APPENDIX C

### INTERNAL COHERENCE SURVEY

Strategic Education Research Partnership  
Internal Coherence Survey

#### Part I: Principal as the Instructional leader

1 **To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?**

The principal or headmaster at this school:

1 Strongly disagree      2 Somewhat disagree      3 Somewhat agree      4 Strongly agree

a. Makes clear to the staff his or her expectations for meeting instructional goals.

1       2       3       4

b. Communicates a clear vision for our school.

1       2       3       4

c. Sets high standards for teaching.

1       2       3       4

d. Understands how children learn.

1       2       3       4

e. Sets high standards for student learning.

1       2       3       4

f. Presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development.

1                      2                      3                      4

g. Carefully tracks students' academic progress.

1                      2                      3                      4

h. Knows what's going on in my classroom.

1                      2                      3                      4

i. Actively monitors the quality of teaching in this school.

1                      2                      3                      4

j. Uses assessment data to give teachers feedback about instruction at the classroom and school levels.

1                      2                      3                      4

---

**Strategic Education Research Partnership  
Internal Coherence Survey**

**Part II: Teacher Impact**

---

**2 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?**

1                      2                      3                      4  
Strongly disagree    Somewhat disagree    Somewhat agree    Strongly agree

a. Teachers in the school are able to get through to the most difficult students.

1                      2                      3                      4

b. Teachers in this school have what it takes to get the children to learn.

1                      2                      3                      4

c. Teachers here need more training to know how to deal with difficult students.

1                      2                      3                      4

d. Teachers in this school truly believe every child can learn.

1                      2                      3                      4

e. Our school has the potential to raise PSSA scores.

1                      2                      3                      4

f. Teachers in this school don't have the skills needed to increase the quality of the students' learning.

1                      2                      3                      4

g. Teachers here have the skills and knowledge to teach the subjects they are assigned to teach.

1                      2                      3                      4

h. Home life, not teacher instruction, determines whether a student will achieve in school.

1                      2                      3                      4

i. The way this school operates today will not increase student learning.

1                      2                      3                      4

j. I have the resources I need to teach my students with special needs.

1                      2                      3                      4

k. I have the resources I need to teach my students with limited knowledge of English.

1                      2                      3                      4

l. I have the resources to identify students at risk of failure.

1                      2                      3                      4

m. I have the resources to provide supplementary instruction for students who are identified as being at risk of failure.

1                      2                      3                      4

---

**Strategic Education Research Partnership  
Internal Coherence Survey**

**Part III: The School and Assessment Data**

**3 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?**

1                      2                      3                      4  
Strongly disagree      Somewhat disagree      Somewhat agree      Strongly agree

a. It's important for me that the school raise scores on PSSA.

1                      2                      3                      4

b. The goals of the state's testing system are unrealistic for our students.

1  2  3  4

c. The results on PSSA reflect the quality of the instruction at the school.

1  2  3  4

d. PSSA plays an important role when the school sets learning goals for the students.

1  2  3  4

e. The goals of achievement tests have changed our instruction.

1  2  3  4

f. Test-score accountability has helped us focus on what's best for our students.

1  2  3  4

g. The state learning standards are appropriate guidelines for what students should know.

1  2  3  4

h. My teaching is well aligned with the district's curriculum.

1  2  3  4

i. My students' learning outcomes are considered as part of my evaluation.

1  2  3  4

j. I feel comfortable working with data.

1  2  3  4

---

4 Do you receive data about student performance on district-wide benchmark assessments promptly?

YES  NO

---

5 To what extent do you use these data for adjusting instruction during the year?

Not at all  To a small extent  To a moderate extent  To a great extent  
 1  2  3  4

## Part IV: Teacher Self-Assessment

---

Questions 6-8 ask you to identify the three (3) criteria that are most important to you in evaluating your own success as a teacher, in order of their importance.

---

- 6 Which of the following criteria is **the most important** to you in evaluating your own success as a teacher?
- High test scores on teacher-made tests
  - Motivated students
  - Status among the teachers
  - PSSA scores
  - Praise from the principal
  - I just know it in my heart
  - Lively participation of class
  - Answers from individual students
  - Students complete tasks
  - Positive comments from parents
  - My students' skills compared to other students in other classes
  - Affection from students
- 

- 7 Which of the following criteria is **the second (2nd) most important** to you in evaluating your own success as a teacher?
- High test scores on teacher-made tests
  - Motivated students
  - Status among the teachers
  - PSSA scores
  - Praise from the principal
  - I just know it in my heart
  - Lively participation of class
  - Answers from individual students
  - Students complete tasks
  - Positive comments from parents
  - My students' skills compared to other students in other classes
  - Affection from students

- 8 Which of the following criteria is **the third (3rd) most important** to you in evaluating your own success as a teacher?
- High test scores on teacher-made tests
  - Motivated students
  - Status among the teachers
  - PSSA scores
  - Praise from the principal
  - I just know it in my heart
  - Lively participation of class
  - Answers from individual students
  - Students complete tasks
  - Positive comments from parents
  - My students' skills compared to other students in other classes
  - Affection from students

---

**Strategic Education Research Partnership  
Internal Coherence Survey**

**Part V: Teacher Influence**

- 9 How much actual influence do you think teachers have over school policy AT THIS SCHOOL in each of the following areas?

1                      2                      3                      4  
No influence      Minor influence      Moderate influence      A great deal of influence

a. Setting performance standards for students

1       2       3       4

b. Establishing curriculum

1       2       3       4

c. Determining the content of in-service professional development programs

1       2       3       4

d. Evaluating teachers

1       2       3       4

e. Hiring full-time teachers

1      2      3      4  
f. Setting discipline policy

1      2      3      4  
g. Deciding how the school budget will be spent

1      2      3      4

---

10 How much actual influence do you have IN YOUR CLASSROOM at this school over the following areas of your planning and teaching?

1                      2                      3                      4  
No influence      Minor influence      Moderate influence      A great deal of influence

a. Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials

1      2      3      4

b. Selecting content, topics, and skills to be taught

1      2      3      4

c. Selecting teaching techniques

1      2      3      4

d. Evaluating and grading students

1      2      3      4

e. Disciplining students

1      2      3      4

f. Determining the amount of homework to be assigned

1      2      3      4

---

Questions 11-13 ask you to select the three (3) reasons you think best explain why the school's results on the state achievements tests (PSSA) were not higher, in order of importance.

---

11 What do you think is the main explanation for why the school's results on the recent state achievement tests (MCAS) were not higher?

- Unmotivated students
- Teachers' lack of skills
- Discipline problems
- The students' home background
- Students' ability to learn

- Parents don't monitor/assist with student schoolwork
- The lack of resources
- How the school organizes work here
- Teachers' level of instruction
- Low expectations
- Poor instruction at previous school
- Student expectations vary from teacher to teacher

---

12 What do you think is **the second most important** explanation for why the school's results on the recent state achievement tests (PSSA) were not higher?

- Unmotivated students
- Teachers' lack of skills
- Discipline problems
- The students' home background
- Students' ability to learn
- Parents don't monitor/assist with student schoolwork
- The lack of resources
- How the school organizes work here
- Teachers' level of instruction
- Low expectations
- Poor instruction at previous school
- Student expectations vary from teacher to teacher

---

13 What do you think is **the third most important** explanation for why the school's results on the recent state achievement tests (PSSA) were not higher?

- Unmotivated students
- Teachers' lack of skills
- Discipline problems
- The students' home background
- Students' ability to learn
- Parents don't monitor/assist with student schoolwork
- The lack of resources
- How the school organizes work here
- Teachers' level of instruction
- Low expectations
- Poor instruction at previous school
- Student expectations vary from teacher to teacher

---

**14 Rank the following nine (9) factors, in order of importance, by their influence on how much students learn in school. Rank your choices with 1 for the most important, 2 for the next most important, etc.**

| 1   | 2                                | 3                     | 4                     | 5                     | 6                     | 7                     | 8                     | 9                     |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Family support for schooling  |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Family income   |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Degree to which the classroom lessons require students to play an active role |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Intrinsic motivation of the students  |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Quality of life in the students' community                                    |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Clear and regular feedback to students on their performance                   |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Teachers' knowledge of instructional practice                                 |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The level of academic challenge in lessons                                    |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/>  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| School and classroom disciplinary practices                                   |                                  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
| <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

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## Part VI: School Atmosphere

---

15 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

1 Strongly disagree      2 Somewhat disagree      3 Somewhat agree      4 Strongly agree

a. The school administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.

1       2       3       4

b. The principal involves the staff members before he/she makes important decisions.

1       2       3       4

c. Staff members are recognized for a job well done.

1       2       3       4

d. Most of my colleagues share my beliefs and values about the central mission of the school.

1       2       3       4

e. There is a great deal of cooperative effort among the staff members.

1       2       3       4

f. The faculty and leadership of this school are in agreement about strategies to put into place so that all students will learn more.

1       2       3       4

g. I make a conscious effort to coordinate the content of my courses with that of other teachers.

1       2       3       4

h. I plan and conduct my lessons in clear connection to the school's common goals.

1       2       3       4

i. To be a teacher at this school is harder than being a teacher at other schools in the district.

1       2       3       4

j. I want to find a job in another school.

1       2       3       4

---

16 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following

**statements?**

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Strongly disagree    Somewhat disagree    Somewhat agree    Strongly agree

a. Teachers have many informal opportunities to influence what happens here.

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_

b. Teachers in this school regularly discuss assumptions about teaching and learning.

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_

c. Teachers talk about instruction in the teachers' lounge, faculty meetings, etc.

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_

d. Teachers in this school share and discuss student work with other teachers.

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_

e. Experienced teachers invite new teachers into their rooms to observe, give feedback, etc.

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_

f. A conscious effort is made by faculty to make new teachers feel welcome here.

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_

---

**17 How many teachers in this school:**

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_  
None    Some    About Half    Most    Nearly All

a. Help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their classroom?

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_  5 \_\_\_\_\_

b. Take responsibility for improving the school?

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_  5 \_\_\_\_\_

c. Set high standards for themselves?

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_  5 \_\_\_\_\_

d. Feel responsible that all students learn?

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_  5 \_\_\_\_\_

e. Feel responsible when students in this school fail?

1 \_\_\_\_\_  2 \_\_\_\_\_  3 \_\_\_\_\_  4 \_\_\_\_\_  5 \_\_\_\_\_

f. Are really trying to improve their teaching?

1

2

3

4

5

Strategic Education Research Partnership  
Internal Coherence Survey

Part VII: Peer Collaboration

18 How accurately or inaccurately do the following statements reflect your opinions?

|                          |                      |                        |                                       |                      |                    |                        |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1                        | 2                    | 3                      | 4                                     | 5                    | 6                  | 7                      |
| Completely<br>inaccurate | Mostly<br>inaccurate | Somewhat<br>inaccurate | Neither<br>accurate nor<br>inaccurate | Somewhat<br>accurate | Mostly<br>accurate | Completely<br>accurate |

a. It is important for me to participate in school-level committees that shape the mission of the school.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

b. The mission of a school should have a direct impact on a teacher's instructional practice.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

c. Teachers have a responsibility to develop a strong sense of community in their schools.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

19 Indicate how untrue or true the following statements are in describing you:

|                            |                        |                          |                                     |                        |                      |                          |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1                          | 2                      | 3                        | 4                                   | 5                      | 6                    | 7                        |
| Completely<br>untrue of me | Mostly<br>untrue of me | Somewhat<br>untrue of me | Neither true<br>nor untrue of<br>me | Somewhat<br>true of me | Mostly<br>true of me | Completely<br>true of me |

a. I believe most of the instructional strategies that I learn in professional development, workshops, or conferences can help me improve my instructional practice.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

b. If I were to implement the instructional practices I read or hear about, I think my instruction would become more effective than it is now.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

c. I believe that it is my responsibility as a teacher to actively research (e.g., read professional journals, observe other professionals, attend classes, etc.) more effective ways to teach my students.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

**20 To what extent do the following statements inaccurately or accurately reflect your personal beliefs?**

1 Completely inaccurate    2 Mostly inaccurate    3 Somewhat inaccurate    4 Neither accurate nor inaccurate    5 Somewhat accurate    6 Mostly accurate    7 Completely accurate

a. When a school administrator observes my classroom, I see it as an opportunity for growth and learning.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

b. The feedback that I get from school administrators when they observe my classroom is useful.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

c. When a mentor, coach, or department head observes my classroom, I see it as an opportunity for growth and learning.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

d. When a teaching colleague observes my classroom, I see it as an opportunity for growth and learning.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

e. Discussions about members' instructional practice should be conducted in department or grade-level meetings.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

f. I would greatly benefit from having colleagues observe my instructional practice.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

g. I would greatly benefit from having colleagues offer constructive criticism about my instructional practice.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

**The following questions pose a scenario to which you are asked to respond. We would like you to answer these questions twice – first, answer given the culture of your current school (ACTUAL) and second, answer according to your natural inclinations (IDEAL).**

**21** Imagine that a colleague with similar years of teaching experience and training has asked you to review a curriculum unit that she has developed. You find that there are some very good parts of the unit, but there is substantial mismatch between the instructional goals of the individual lessons and the overarching curricular objectives of the unit. How likely would you be to offer feedback to your colleague that

addresses the problems in the unit?

1 Not at all      2 A little bit      3 Somewhat      4 A good deal      5 Extremely  
a. Actual

1       2       3       4       5  
b. Ideal

1       2       3       4       5

---

22 During a classroom observation of a colleague, you notice that some of his instructional practices are not particularly effective at engaging students. How likely would you be to discuss this ineffective practice with your colleague?

1 Not at all      2 A little bit      3 Somewhat      4 A good deal      5 Extremely  
a. Actual

1       2       3       4       5  
b. Ideal

1       2       3       4       5

---

23 One of your colleagues expresses frustration to you about her students' classroom behavior. You are aware that she neglects to employ some important techniques in maintaining a classroom that is conducive to learning. How likely are you to point out these techniques that could improve her classroom climate?

1 Not at all      2 A little bit      3 Somewhat      4 A good deal      5 Extremely  
a. Actual

1       2       3       4       5  
b. Ideal

1       2       3       4       5

---

24 A colleague has asked for your assistance in evaluating some of his students' work. While reviewing the work, you realize that his assessment lacks clear, objective standards and as a result his evaluations seem somewhat arbitrary. How likely are you to point out to your colleague the need for clear, objective standards when evaluating student work?

1 Not at all      2 A little bit      3 Somewhat      4 A good deal      5 Extremely  
a. Actual

1      2      3      4      5  
b. Ideal

1      2      3      4      5

---

25 **Given the culture and climate of this school, how likely would you be to share with your colleagues the following types of effective practices you have discovered, developed, or learned about?**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7  
Completely    Very unlikely    Somewhat    Neither likely    Somewhat    Very likely    Completely  
unlikely      unlikely      nor unlikely    likely      likely      likely      likely

a. Instructional Practice

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

b. Curricular Materials (textbooks, workbooks, etc.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

c. Student Motivation Techniques (games, activities, etc.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

d. Classroom Management Techniques (behavior modification, positive reinforcement, etc.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

---

26 **Considering only your natural inclinations (ignoring the culture of your current school), how likely would you be to share with your colleagues the following types of effective practices you have discovered, developed, or learned about?**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7  
Completely    Very unlikely    Somewhat    Neither likely    Somewhat    Very likely    Completely  
unlikely      unlikely      unlikely      nor unlikely    likely      likely      likely

a. Instructional Practice

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

b. Curricular Materials (textbooks, workbooks, etc.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

c. Student Motivation Techniques (games, activities, etc.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

d. Classroom Management Techniques (behavior modification, positive reinforcement, etc.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

**Part VIII: Open Response**

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**27** In what year did you begin teaching at your current school?

**28** If you could ask for something that you think would have positive results for student learning at your school, it would be:

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