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Developing the potential for sustainable improvement in underperforming schools: Capacity building in the socio-cultural dimension

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Abstract This mixed-method study examines Arizona principals' capacity-building skills and practices in Tier III schools aimed at developing potential for sustained improvements in student outcomes. Data sources included surveys (62 individuals) and semistructured interviews (29 individuals) of principals and staff (e.g. teachers, instructional coaches, assistant principals) who participated in grant-funded leadership training over an 18-month period. The theoretical framework consisted of leadership in the sociocultural dimension (Ylimaki et al. in Leadersh Policy Sch 11(2):168–193, 2012) and capacity building for sustainable improvement in high-capacity Schools (Mitchell and Sackney in Sustainable improvement: building learning communities that endure. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2009). Findings indicated that: (1) schools were not at high-levels of capacity building; (2) those schools in process of building capacity for sustainable improvement demonstrate a directive leadership approach; (3) school development towards high capacity focused on micro-level processes (e.g., professional learning communities); and (4) little attention was given to leadership in the socio-cultural dimension. Implications of the study suggest future research test a leadership development model for Tier III schools that links capacity building leadership and student achievement. The next generation of educational leaders must also have the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and analytical tools to lead schools in both the accountability culture and the macro socio-cultural dimension.

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Introduction

In today's accountability era, principals in high-poverty and persistently underperforming schools must have the knowledge and skills to build leadership capacity that develops the potential for sustainable improvements in teaching and learning. Federal policy [No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2002] requires all schools to make adequate yearly progress toward a goal of 100 % proficiency on state tests by 2014. Like many states across the US, in the fall of 2010, the Arizona Department of Education instituted a letter grade system to designate and compare school performance. The A–F letter grade system uses a combination of students' scores on Arizona's instrument to measure standards (AIMS) tests (50 %) and the academic growth of students from 1 year to the next (50 %).[1] Nearly 15 % of over 1,800 Arizona public schools received D or F grades (Arizona Department of Education 2012e). Forty-four percent received a C or below. According to the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), schools that do not make adequate yearly progress on state assessments over a series of years are subject to reconstitution or turnaround status.

While over 400 schools have been identified by the state as in need of some level of state intervention based on eligibility for Title I, Part A funds (e.g., low graduation rates, performance relative to other Title I schools in the state; Arizona Department of Education 2012d), support has been rather fragmented and sporadic. A large proportion of schools needing state intervention (over 60 %) have been classified as Tier III schools needing corrective action because they have failed to achieve AYP over a period of several years (Arizona Department of Education 2012b).[2] If this corrective action is unsuccessful, schools move from Tier III status to turnaround status meaning that district officials must hire new administration and replace at least 50 % of the teachers. Furthermore, principals in corrective action (persistently-low achieving) contexts face additional challenges. Arizona state policy mandates that significant proportions of principal evaluations (33–50 %), including performance pay, are based on student academic growth, including student outcomes on state tests [A.R.S. §15–203(A) (38)].

Arizona schools also serve culturally diverse students with the slight majority being Hispanic or Latino. According to the Arizona Department of Education (2012c), the percentage of public school children with Hispanic or Latino origin is 42.8 %. The percentage of White not Hispanic student population is slightly lower (42.3 %). The remainder of the Arizona student population is comprised of 5.4 %

[1] AIMS is the Arizona state standards-based assessment that measures student proficiency of the Arizona Academic Content Standards in Writing, Reading, Mathematics, and Science and is required by state and federal law (Arizona Department of Education 2012a).

[2] Tier III schools are distinct from Tier I or II schools. Tier I schools are among the lowest-achieving 5 % of Title I schools and had a graduation rate below 60 %. Tier 2 consists of secondary schools with graduation rates below 60 %, among the lowest achieving 5 %, and eligible for Title I funds but did not receive them (Arizona Department of Education 2012d).

Black or African American, 4.8 % American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.8 % Asian, .3 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 1.6 % Multiracial. Student population data, with the exception of Hispanic or Latino and Whites, reflect statewide population trends.[3] Many Arizona schools also serve disproportionate trends of children of color living in poverty and ELL students.

The Arizona policy environment is particularly challenging for principals of Arizona schools that have been in school improvement for a series of years given current curriculum and accountability politics. We draw on empirical findings from a mixed-methods study and the literature to examine Arizona principals' capacity-building skills and practices aimed at improvements in student outcomes in Tier III or persistently underperforming, high poverty schools on the verge of reconstitution or turnaround status.

Our paper is organized into seven main sections. We begin with an examination of the broader socio-cultural and political climate for leadership in Arizona. The second section presents the conceptual framework that guided our analysis. Third, we discuss our research methods and design. The fourth and fifth major sections highlight quantitative and qualitative findings that illustrate the importance of leadership capacity to sustainable improvement in culturally diverse Arizona schools. Following a discussion of the findings, we conclude with implications for future research, leadership preparation, and practice in culturally diverse, high-poverty and traditionally underperforming schools.

Socio-cultural and political context for leadership and capacity building

Our conceptual framework consists of two key interrelated components that frame leadership capacity-building for change and related principal skills and practices among Tier III schools: successful school leadership in the socio-cultural dimension and capacity building aimed at curriculum improvement. Both components draw attention to the interrelated nature of micro- and macro-level dynamics that shape leadership and capacity building efforts in culturally diverse underperforming schools. We begin with an examination of the socio-cultural and political context of Arizona.

Socio-cultural and political context of Arizona

Recent federal policies and state mandates reflect a new paradigm of educational leadership defined by performance outcomes, curriculum reforms, and standardization (e.g. NCLB 2002; Race to the Top Fund). For example, in addition to the goal of 100 % proficiency on state tests by the year 2014, No Child Left Behind

[3] According to a US Census (2009) report, the percentage of Arizona population with Hispanic or Latino origin is 30.8 %. American Indian and Alaska Native persons count 4.9 % of Arizona population, significantly more than the national parameter of 1.0 %. The percentage of White not Hispanic population in Arizona is 57.3 %, lower than that national data of 65.1 %. The percentages of other ethnicities in the Arizona population are 4.4 % Black or African American, 2.6 % Asian, .2 % Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 1.8 % reporting two or more races (US Census 2009).

(2002) articulates consequences for failure to make adequate yearly progress on state tests toward this outcome. If schools do not make adequate yearly progress goals over a series of years, consequences include conversion to charter school status, staff restructuring, and reconstitution. Going further, Race to the Top rewards schools for attaining "labels" of high performance.[4] School performance indicators may also impact principals in other ways (US Department of Education 2009). For instance, Arizona mandated that districts base 33–50 % of principal evaluations on student academic growth or student outcomes on state tests [A.R.S. §15–203(A) (38)].

These federal and state policies are further complicated by Arizona policies that restrict bilingual education (A.R.S. §15–752) and ban ethnic studies (HB 2281). Arizona Proposition 203, passed in 2000, mandates the use of structured English immersion (SEI), an intensive 1–3 year transitional language program for every Arizona public school child not fluent in English Arizona Prop 203, enacted as A.R.S. §15–752, exempts no child regardless of her/his. English language proficiency from annual standardized state testing in English although accommodations may be available during first year. Arizona administrators who fail to implement SEI in their schools face sanctions. Closely related, in 2010 Arizona banned Mexican-American studies and related critical pedagogy in the Tucson Unified School District, one of the largest Arizona school districts (A.R.S. §15–112). Teachers face sanctions if they use critical pedagogy and a particular set of Chicano literature.

Michael Apple (2004) explains both federal and state policy trends in terms of a dominant (conservative) alliance among neoliberalism, neoconservativism, authoritarian populism, the new middle class, and increasingly, neonationalism. For neoliberals, a person is most properly understood as a self-interested individual who makes rational choices as a "consumer" within a competitive marketplace. Neoconservatives call for a stronger role for the government in making schools accountable for higher curriculum and moral standards. These higher standards are achieved through performance labels on standardized tests and an emphasis on basic skills in traditional subjects (Apple 1996, 2000). Authoritarian populism, which has become increasingly popular in recent years, features a particular religious base. Schools are seen as a primary threat to moral, religious family life in that they are a site for the elite and foreign knowledge that contradicts the sound, traditional teachings of the American Christian family (Apple 2004). The members of the new middle class are those who provide the technical, legal, procedural, and bureaucratic expertise to make this system of standardization and comparison possible. According to Apple, this hegemonic alliance has been successful by circulating a particular set of discourses that affect public perception or acceptance about education (e.g., school accountability labels, free market competition, standardization, anti-immigration/language policies and character education). Like other states across the US, Arizona traditional public schools must compete with a large charter

[4] Public schools in the US are classified by their level of academic performance as defined by the states in which they are located. For example, Arizona uses letter grades for performance labels (Arizona Department of Education 2012d).

school population; maintain high school performance labels from standardized test results—results that are now also directly linked to their evaluations. Discourses regarding "English-only" education and anti-immigration have been particularly virulent along the US-Mexico border.

Our study focuses on Arizona schools (and their leaders) that did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for 2 or more years (Tier III schools). We invited these schools to participate in a series of grant-funded leadership training institutes over a period of 18 months in 2011 and 2012 in partnership with the other two land-grant universities in the state. Our purpose was to help school leadership teams to build capacity for sustainable improvement in the midst of these intense political pressures, policy mandates, and diverse, high poverty demographics. In other words, leaders who are in the midst of the current socio-cultural and political context and serve in high-poverty Tier III schools in the US must explicitly consider the socio-cultural dimension as they build capacity for sustainable improvement.

Leadership in the socio-cultural dimension

Leadership in the socio-cultural dimension is based on the work of Ylimaki et al. (2012), which extends understanding of successful leadership and capacity-building beyond the Leithwood and Riehl (2003, 2005) framework. Drawing upon a meta-analysis of leadership studies in the US and other western countries, Leithwood and Riehl identified four core practices as necessary but not sufficient for success in any context:

1. *Setting Directions*: Leaders set a clear direction by developing and communicating shared goals that encourage a sense of common purpose and high performance expectations.
2. *Developing People*: Effective leaders offered teachers intellectual stimulation and individualized support.
3. *Redesigning the Organization*: Effective leaders were more democratic and redesigned their schools as professional learning communities (PLCs). In so doing, these principals modified existing school structures and processes to increase professional collaboration and dialogue among teachers and to improve home-school relationships.
4. *Managing the Instructional Program*: Successful principals also paid close attention to curriculum and instructional improvement efforts in their challenging, high-poverty schools. According to Leithwood and Riehl (2005), four sets of leadership practices are included in this general category, including staffing the school's program with teachers well matched to the school's priorities; providing instructional support; monitoring school activity; and buffering staff from distractions to their work (i.e. protecting instructional time).

Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) tested these leadership practices in a mixed methods study of leadership in 96 schools across the US based on a survey to measure principals' and teachers' use of leadership practices shown in previous studies to indirectly affect student achievement. Leadership was assessed using a 104-item

survey and examined principals' and teachers' knowledge of capacity, motivation, setting, and collective leadership. Findings indicated that teachers and principals agreed that the most instructionally helpful leadership practices were: (1) focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement; (2) keeping track of teachers' professional development needs; and (3) creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate. All scales on the Leithwood survey achieved acceptable levels of reliability (Alpha coefficients between .72 and .96). Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) demonstrated with strong evidence the indirect effects between these leadership practices and student outcomes.

Concerned with few empirical studies that provided principals with explicit guidance on how to navigate the cultural and political issues relevant to schools with growing Latino(a)/Hispanic, Native American, and other colonized populations, Ylimaki et al. (2012) examined case studies of how four Southern Arizona principals (3 elementary, 1 middle) conceptualized and enacted "successful" educational leadership for the benefit of improved student academic and affective performance. The Ylimaki, Bennett, Fan, and Villaseñor study was part of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP). The ISSPP is a large and important body of research that currently contains more than 130 case studies and several-thousand survey responses across twenty countries, and has produced numerous publications. The focus of the ISSPP is on the knowledge, skills and dispositions used by successful school principals for implementing effective school and leadership practices across a range of successful schools in different national contexts. Findings from the Arizona cases of ISSPP suggested the importance of a socio-cultural dimension as well as leadership capacity (Ylimaki et al. 2012).

The socio-cultural dimension transverses three domains: (1) consciousness and awareness of the border context, and political environment; (2) culturally responsive leadership capacity; and (3) relationships in an ethic of community. First, in Southern Arizona, successful leadership is animated by a set of core values, beliefs, and commitments to improving the whole lives of children and primarily colonized communities. Principals understood the demographics and border context of their schools, developed an agreed upon school vision, provided staff with individual support, modeled excellent teaching and learning, collaborated with community organizations to fulfill language policy requirements in culturally respectful ways, and shared leadership when appropriate.[5]

Second, principals and teachers developed culturally responsive leadership capacity as they considered community expectations and beliefs as an integral part of the shared decision-making process. They delivered curricular and instructional programs that incorporated students' cultural funds of knowledge or backgrounds into instruction in ways that meet academic expectations reflected in federal and state policies.[6] Furthermore, culturally responsive practices were negotiated and adapted to the socio-cultural context in ways that build cultural and social capital or

[5] Arizona high schools are required to comply with language requirements as part of accountability expectations (e.g. English only, 4-h English Language Development block for English Language Learners; Rios-Aguilar et al. 2010).

[6] For more about funds of knowledge, please see Moll et al. (1992).

the knowledge, skills, dispositions that enable internalization of norms valued by society and access to social networks necessary for creating an equitable life condition despite students' backgrounds.[7]

Finally, with commitment to valuing multiple perspectives and diversity facilitated by collaborative processes and exchanges of cultural knowledge about the community, a democratic atmosphere is cultivated in which culturally responsive practices could be realized. Participants developed a shared vision of collaboration and community development that not only respected and responded to the national and local cultures in which their schools were situated, but conveyed moral purpose to distribute leadership for change even among stakeholders beyond school boundaries. Deeply democratic processes were established that continually invited dialogue, open inquiry, and fostered collaborative practices that promote deep respect, democratic education, and the greater good of a democratic society.[8] Ylimaki et al. (2012) findings indicated that leadership of Arizona principals in the socio-cultural dimension enabled capacity of Leithwood and Riehl's (2003, 2005) four core practices to influence positive change. Our understanding of capacity building is also shaped by the work of Mitchell and Sackney (2009) on practices associated with sustainable improvement in high-capacity schools.

Capacity building for curriculum improvement in high-capacity schools

Mitchell and Sackney (2009) conducted interviews and observations in Canadian schools over a 10-year period and identified seven themes that must drive practices for sustainable improvement in an era of accountability: (1) shared vision, values, and goals (i.e., inclusive of all voices in shaping vision, all committed to bring agreed-upon vision to life); (2) collaborative work culture; (3) collective learning and shared understanding; (4) a focus on reflective practice and experimentation (i.e., innovation, risk-taking in pedagogy and curriculum as the norm, climate of ongoing renewal and improvement); (5) presence of knowledge systems and data-based decision making (i.e., collaborative inquiry, transform data into meaningful knowledge); (6) communities of leaders (i.e., sharing of tasks shaping school direction); and (7) a culture of high trust. Schools with evidence of all seven themes developed into high capacity PLCs and improved student learning and achievement. Specifically, three embedded but interactive layers of capacity-building leadership were necessary to develop the school organization into high capacity learning communities: building people, building commitments, and building schools. First, we will consider leadership characteristics and practices aimed at building individual capacity at the micro-level.

Building people

Building people or *personal capacity in action* was defined as a commitment to growth, expressed in a desire to help others grow as they have grown (Mitchell and

[7] For more about culturally responsive practices please see Johnson (2007), Johnson et al. (2011), For more about cultural capital, please see Bourdieu (1986).

[8] For more about the ethic of community, please see Furman (2004).

Sackney 2009). According to these authors, staff works hard to build a culture of trust, deep respect, experimentation, support, and encouragement that fosters innovation and risk-taking. People are honored and thrive as they grow as members of a connected community. Autonomy to grow and develop professionally releases a creative energy that strengthens personal identity (e.g., self-confidence, self-efficacy) and intensifies as it percolates and flows among community members. Teachers develop habits of inquiry and reflection, and are continually searching for new knowledge to expand their curriculum understandings and instructional practices. Through this growth, teachers build a practice that does not abandon the standards curriculum, but balances the written curriculum with student needs and interests. Teacher determination to improve is also driven by feelings of personal obligation toward students because they believe it is what children deserve.

Principals, according to Mitchell and Sackney (2009), encourage growth by establishing the kind of personalized learning environment they expected teachers to provide. They allow teacher leadership to emerge naturally in response to interest and priorities. Principals continually strive to celebrate successes and ensure teachers do not have to endure any disrespectful pressure or scrutiny that might hamper creative energy and spirit. Principals serve as models of deep respect for students, parents, and staff, committed to building the kind of learning environment where "no child—and no teacher—goes unnoticed or unknown" (p. 102).

Building commitments

Building commitments or *interpersonal capacity in action* is based in the development of deep trust, collective responsibility, and appreciating diversity. Administrators trust teachers to "complete the tasks that they take on and teachers trust students to complete their tasks to the best of their abilities" (Mitchell and Sackney 2009, p. 79). Collaboration is developed through working together in teams and teachers understand the value of professional and authentic teamwork. Administrative support for collaboration is guided by facilitating open communication, opening physical and psychological spaces for teachers to talk with one another, and by providing unmanaged team times for joint planning and organizing meeting times (Mitchell and Sackney 2009). Principals do not manage or control activities although they maintain the expectation of remaining informed.

Conflict is not ignored within collaboration but embraced as a learning opportunity to engage in honest, respectful deliberation and dialogue that involves active listening, inquiry, reflection, suspension of personal interests or agendas, and willingness to thoughtfully explore all sides with an open mind and is inclusive of all voices. Professional discourse within collaboration is also guided by educational content (i.e., concepts, theories) and purposed toward constructing shared understandings and expertise about teaching and learning. Members successfully navigate conflict or other difficult situations based on shared commitments toward providing the "best learning environment children in their care" and that they "happy and successful" (Mitchell and Sackney 2009, pp. 101–102). Principals are instrumental in respectfully reminding individuals of shared commitments and when they appear

out of focus or off track, which is inspired by their "forthright, open, honest, and welcoming personality" (Mitchell and Sackney, p. 78).

Building schools

Building schools or *organizational capacity in action* is based in several areas: (a) building networks, (b) building knowledge systems, (c) building leadership infrastructure, and (d) organizing to build capacity. Building networks refers to the interdependency of the staff within the school and collective responsibility for a child-centered learning vision. Teachers develop connected planned units that support student learning throughout the whole school. Knowledge is built through authentic and teacher-led professional development activities that "link professional knowledge with professional practice" with contextual relevance (Mitchell and Sackney, p. 117). Professional development activities emphasize using a wide array of student, teacher, and school data that are analyzed regularly and purposely linked with instructional practices and educational decisions.

Leadership in high capacity schools is emergent and incorporates both formal leadership and informal leadership capacities. For example, teachers are invited to participate in a variety of governing bodies or committees (e.g., site councils, curriculum teams, school improvement, and community involvement) and given autonomy over decision making within these focus areas and the overall direction of the school. Principals, as *first learners*, support teachers with the necessary information, resources, and continually seek to disturb the status quo. They become the "the driving force that directed activity and focused purpose" (Mitchell and Sackney 2009, p. 145). Capacity building for curriculum improvement in high-capacity schools is not a role or set of tasks or routines, but an inherent element of life for all staff rooted in a "whole child" and "whole village" vision of teaching and learning (Mitchell and Sackney, pp. 136, 138).

Mitchell and Sackney (2009) clearly situate capacity building for authentic learning within an ecological framework that considers not only the micro-level (e.g., structures, functions, resources, relationships) interconnections but also the embeddedness within the macro or natural and social environment (e.g., values, beliefs, history, cultural diversity) unique for each school. Thus, high capacity schools are viewed as a living system distinct from low-capacity schools whose focus remains on "producing" and "compliance" within a managed system (Mitchell and Sackney 2009, p. 9). We agree with Mitchell and Sackney on the ecological nature of capacity building although we view their consideration of the macro-level influences as underdeveloped.

We understand capacity building leadership based on all of these authors, as the culmination of transformative leadership skills, dispositions, processes, and practices at both micro- and macro-levels (e.g., sociocultural dimension) of the school organization that fosters a communal bond among stakeholders imbued with the moral responsibility for improving the whole lives of children and achieving desired student learning outcomes. Our understanding of the literature suggests that leadership capacity building for sustainable improvement has been understood as a micro-level phenomenon that largely ignores macro-level understanding of and

responsiveness to cultural diversity and other social, political, and contextual factors. We argue that capacity building for sustainable improvement in persistently low-achieving schools and communities dealing with demographic shifts, significant proportions of ethnic minorities, immigration and language issues, or accountability as in the case of Arizona and indeed, across the United States, therefore, requires explicit consideration of the socio-cultural dimension. The next section describes our research methods and design.

Research methods and design

The purpose of this study was to examine Arizona principals' capacity-building skills and practices aimed at improvements in student outcomes in Tier III schools. This study followed guidelines for a mixed-methods design. Specifically, two research questions were of interest:

1. What aspects of capacity do principals of Tier III schools need to develop?
2. How do participants understand building capacity for sustainable improvement?

Sampling

We drew upon a statewide sample of Tier III schools (252) and identified 62 schools that did not receive any other kind of intervention support.[9] All 62 were invited to take part in a grant-funded leadership capacity building training partnership involving the three state land-grant universities with the first session held in Arizona in August, 2011. Among the 62 invited, 45 schools (73 %) agreed to participate. The training featured an 18-month process of institutes with speakers and planning time as well as regional follow-up meetings with university facilitators and exemplary award-winning principals and online support readings and discussions regarding implementation. Training content featured leadership development around Leithwood and Riehl's (2005) leadership categories, related findings from the Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) leadership study, capacity building (Mitchell and Sackney 2009), and assessment literacy skills necessary for school improvement. Participants were invited to the trainings because they serve in schools that qualify for Title I services, have been in school improvement for at least 2 years, and are not currently receiving targeted interventions. The lack of additional resources for intervention was a major component of participation for many of the schools.

Participation depended upon superintendent support and participant willingness to commit to all aspects of the project for the 18 month period. Representing the 45 schools were 80 participants (46 % staff; 54 % principals); their racial/ethnic/gender demographics were predominantly female (74 % of staff and 62 % of principals) and White (67 % of principals and 62 % of staff; see Table 1). Staff members consisted of roles such as teachers, instructional coaches, and assistant

[9] The other 190 schools qualified for school improvement grants, were reconstituted, or were placed in official turnaround status prior to the beginning of the study.

Table 1 Comparison of survey respondent and training participant characteristics by gender, race/ethnicity

Characteristic	Survey respondents (n = 62)		Training participants (n = 80)	
	Principals (n = 35)	Staff (n = 27)	Principals (n = 43)	Staff (n = 37)
Gender				
% Male	31	22	38	26
% Female	69	78	62	74
Race/ethnicity				
% White	72	63	67	62
% Latino/a/Hispanic	14	15	19	16
% Native American	11	11	12	0
% African American	0	4	0	3
% Other	3	7	2	19

Table 2 Comparison of training participants and survey respondents by location

Location	Survey sample (n = 62)	Training participants (n = 45)
% Urban	26	25
% Surburban	13	19
% Rural	61	56

principals. Other representations included Latino/a/Hispanic (16 % staff; 19 % principals), Native American (0 % staff; 12 % principals), African American (3 % staff; 0 % principals), and Other (19 % staff; 2 % principals). It is important to note that most principal participants had a tenure of 3 years or less, and many were in their first year of service. Schools were located throughout the state of Arizona with 56 % located in rural areas, 25 % urban centers, and 19 % suburban areas (See Table 2).[10]

Data sources and collection

Data sources included surveys and semi-structured interviews and were collected in two phases.

Survey phase

All principal and staff participants were administered a 181-item survey as a pre-assessment prior to the beginning of the first training. Surveys were developed by the authors and are based upon modifications of original surveys developed by

[10] The location of schools within the statewide Tier III sample ($N = 252$) consists of 35 % rural, 24 % urban, and 41 % suburban (Arizona Department of Education 2012b).

researchers in the International Successful School Principals Project.[11] Both principal and staff surveys were divided into eight sections that assessed principals' and teachers' leadership knowledge and practices essential for school turnaround, including principal-specific knowledge, skills and practices as well as capacity for progression through the turnaround stages.[12] Section 1 contained 8 questions about school and demographic information. Section 2 examined perceptions of school priorities in twelve areas, including an equal number of questions querying the current extent of their achievement in the school and progress over the past 5 years (24 questions). Section 3 consisted of 11 questions that examined respondents' perspective of curriculum and, similarly, the principal's contribution to curriculum and instructional leadership in the school (22 questions).

Section 4 was comprised of 20 questions that assessed the extent to which various capacities related to student learning exist in the school and the extent of contribution of the principal in the 20 areas (40 questions). Section 5 queried respondents about the systems for evaluation and accountability in the school as well as the extent to which they feel accountable to stakeholders (7 questions). Section 6 examined the current levels of assessment literacy in the school in 16 areas as well as an equal number of questions considering the extent to which the principal has contributed to them (32 questions). Sections 7 and 8 examined teacher tensions and dilemmas (6 questions) and perceptions of student background and attainment (6 questions). All questions in sections 2–8 contained Likert-scale responses.[13]

The principal survey is comprised of identical section content with the addition of one section that assesses the extent to which the principal perceives they demonstrate the practice of successful leadership characteristics in 16 different areas (e.g., reflection, relationship-building, planning, and professionalism).[14] Ten more open-ended questions were added to allow more elaboration in each section and at the end. To ensure validity, the survey was developed by a 6-member panel of experts in the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) over a period of 2 years. Surveys were piloted to doctoral students at the University of Arizona who were either teachers or principals. All scales of the survey achieved acceptable levels of reliability (Alpha coefficients were .95 and .97 for teachers and principals, respectively). High reliability suggests evidence of generalizability.

Survey respondents yielded an 89 % return rate. Surveys from 18 respondents were eliminated due to large amounts of missing data. Open-ended questions revealed survey data were incomplete due to the respondent's lack of knowledge about the school year as they were new in the position reducing the total survey sample to 62 participants (35 principals, 27 staff). Mean imputation was used to replace missing data for the remaining participants, which, at most, included 1 or 2

[11] The authors added a section on both teacher and principal surveys to query participants about their level of assessment literacy.

[12] Assistant principals were asked to take staff surveys as respondents reflected on the principal and the contributions of her/his practice.

[13] Both principal and staff surveys consisted of the same 137 Likert-scale items.

[14] Additional principal survey items contained Likert-scale responses.

questions per survey. The principal survey sample (31 % male, 69 % female) was comprised of 72 % White, 14 % Latino/a/Hispanic, 11 % Native American, and 3 % Other (see Table 1). The staff survey sample (22 % male, 78 % female) included 50 % White, 17 % Latino/a/Hispanic, 11 % Native American, 4 % African American, and 7 % Other (see Table 1). Schools in the survey sample were located throughout the state of Arizona with 61 % located in rural areas, 26 % urban centers, and 13 % suburban areas (see Table 2).

Interview phase

The qualitative phase of the study featured 30–45 min semi-structured interviews with participants that had completed all aspects of the training to this point, including (a) attendance at all institutes and follow-ups, (b) completion of the survey, and (c) attendance at regional meetings. We kept records in order to know which participants completed all attended institutes, follow-ups, and regional meetings. They also informed us whether or not they had completed the surveys. Interview participants (full participation) included 16 principals and 13 staff (63 % of principals and 65 % of staff did not complete all components; see Table 3) Interview questions were developed from the survey findings, featuring capacity building, collaboration, community involvement, accountability, and values and priorities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during a subsequent instructional leadership institute in January, 2012 in order to determine what changes in capacity-building have occurred during the intervention period since the previous August institute.

Data analysis

Consonant with our mixed methods study procedures, this section is divided into two main sub-sections: (1) quantitative analysis procedures and (2) qualitative analysis procedures.

Table 3 Interview participant characteristics (N = 29)

Characteristic	Staffs (n = 13)	Principals (n = 16)
Gender		
% Female	23	25
% Male	77	75
Race/ethnicity		
% White	84	56
% Latino/a/Hispanic	8	25
% Native American	0	19
% Other	8	0

Table presents only race/ethnicity categories of participants

Quantitative analysis procedures

In order to determine what capacities principals needed to develop, survey results were first analyzed descriptively (e.g., using means, standard deviation) to compare trends between principal and staff participant groups on Likert-type response items. We examined low, medium, and high capacity trends between the principals' self-reported responses and teachers' familiar with her/his practice. *Low capacity* is indicated by survey Likert-type items with a mean score of '1' or '2' (on a 5-point scale) in both teacher and principal groups. *Medium capacity* is indicated by a mean score of '3.' *High capacity* is indicated by survey Likert-type items with a mean score of a '4' or '5' on a 5-point scale in both teacher and principal groups.

Next, we analyzed the gaps or mean differences between teacher and principal groups, which also suggest limitation in capacity. We intended to use Chi squared tests to determine whether mean differences were statistically significant or not but some categories of Liket-type items received too few responses.[15] Therefore, we determined *significant difference* meant at least a mean difference of .5 or more between principals and staff responses on Likert-scale items.

Qualitative analysis

Since the qualitative portion involves contextually sensitive data concerning individual perceptions about the work of each teacher and principal, we employ an interpretative lens to allow for an in-depth inquiry of capacity building for sustainable improvement, which is a "phenomenon in real-life context" (Merriam 2001, p. 191). Our purpose, in this approach, is to uncover causation through "insight, discovery and interpretation" (Merriam 1988, p. 10). Interview data were analyzed inductively in light of high capacity characteristics (Mitchell and Sackney 2009) and leadership in the socio-cultural dimension (Ylimaki et al. 2012). Inductive analysis was used to allow particular themes to emerge based on lived experiences. To ensure reliability, codes and themes used in this study required consensus with two additional coders. We also used triangulated findings with documentation and feedback we received on training materials in the course of our intervention. It is important to note that all of the researchers (two women and two men) are White. That is, four White researchers conducted interviews with participants who were primarily White. At the same time, all of the researchers have held leadership roles (3 as principals) within high poverty, culturally diverse schools.

[15] A Pearson's Chi squared test is the more statistically valid test than an independent samples *t* test to compare means because Likert-scale items assume a discrete distribution rather than a normal distribution (Field 2009). Likert-scale response items on five categories (low to high) can only take on certain values ('1' through '5') on a scale. Independent samples t-tests compare means that have continuous scales. The expected frequencies in all categories of Likert-scale items failed to meet minimum requirements. Expected frequencies should always be greater than 5 (Field 2009).

Quantitative findings

Quantitative findings suggest a range of capacities for sustainable improvement in high-poverty low performing Arizona Schools. Principal and staff limitations in capacity for sustainable improvement are presented as well as those aspects considered as high-capacity indicators.

Limitations in capacity

Limitations were evident in the vast proportion of capacities (92 %) among principal and teacher survey respondents, which ranged from *low* and *medium* on the same 137 Likert-scale items.[16] Principals were far more likely to indicate *high capacity* on Likert-scale items that were unique to the principal survey only.[17] Limitations in capacity were also evident by significant mean differences between teacher and principal responses.[18]

Low capacities

Principal and staff respondents agreed that nearly a quarter (23 %) of the needed capacities were low in their schools. Respondents indicated challenges in shared vision and with some assessment literacy practices. For example, they had difficulties in defining success ($M_p = 2.4$, $SD_p = 1.09$; $M_s = 2.0$, $SD_s = .98$) and consistent implementation of common formative assessments across all grade levels ($M_p = 3.11$, $SD_p = 1.13$; $M_s = 2.9$, $SD_s = 1.22$).[19] Furthermore, respondents held negative views about the extent of a supportive student background (see Table 4). Students were impeded in their academic progress by lack of economic advantage or lack of safety in the surrounding neighborhood. Families were not viewed as supportive of their children's education. Schools also did not take steps to provide inclusive and student relevant curriculum that engaged parental neither student input nor considered outside involvement useful in developing common formative assessments (see Table 5). Students were also minimally involved in contributing to the direction of the school ($M_p = 2.7$, $SD_p = 1.07$; $M_s = 2.7$, $SD_s = .88$). Isolation of the school from the community was further evident in the lack of collaboration with community organizations (e.g., civic associations, businesses, non-profits, etc.), community involvement in supporting curriculum, and communication of and communicating key information about student progress (see Table 6). Schools simply did not engage their communities.

[16] *Low capacity* is indicated by survey Likert-type items with a mean score of '1' or '2' on a 5-point scale. *Medium capacity* is indicated by a mean score of '3'.

[17] *High capacity* is indicated by survey Likert-type items with a mean score of a '4' or '5' on a 5-point scale.

[18] Since we were not able to conduct chi-squared tests due to the expected frequencies not meeting the number of minimum requirements, we determined *significant* meant at least a mean difference of .5 or more between principals and staff responses on Likert-scale items.

[19] The mean and standard deviation for principals is noted by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff.

Table 4 Extent of supportive student background (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Supportive home education environment	1.9	.97	2.0	1.11
Extent of economic advantage for students	1.7	1.08	1.5	.75
Extent students live in a safe neighborhood	2.5	.98	2.4	1.25

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Low, 5 = High); principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

Table 5 Extent of inclusive and student relevant curriculum (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Student relevant curriculum	2.6	.88	3.3	1.13
Change in student relevant curriculum over last 5 years	2.8	.99	3.0	1.06
Students inform curriculum	2.8	.99	2.7	1.1
Parent involvement in curriculum planning	2.7	1.10	2.4	.97
Common formative assessments developed with multiple stakeholders	1.5	.82	1.5	.75

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Low, 5 = High); principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

Table 6 Community relationship building (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Curriculum supported by community partnerships	2.5	.98	2.4	1.15
Principal contributions to curriculum supported by community partnerships	2.7	1.16	2.8	1.11
Collaboration with community organizations	2.7	1.09	2.3	.87
Vision communicated to members of the external community	2.5	1.17	2.7	.99
Assessment data shared with the community	2.5	1.04	2.7	1.11
Principal contributions to sharing assessment data with the community	2.6	1.35	3.11	1.15

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Low, 5 = High); principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

Medium capacities and discrepancies

Principal and staff participants indicated medium capacity on 49 % of the same Likert-scale items on both surveys. Limitations in capacity were also evident among the 6 items in which the mean difference between principals and staff respondents was at a level of .5 or more (on a 5-point scale). Mean scores were either split

Table 7 Likert-scale items with a mean difference of .5 or more (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Student-relevant curriculum	2.6	.88	3.3	1.13
Principal contribution to sharing assessment with community	2.6	1.4	3.1	1.15
Principal contribution to distributed leadership	4.2	.78	3.6	.88
Principal contribution to decision making in the collaborative process	4.1	.80	3.5	.80
Benchmark assessments consistently implemented in classrooms	4.2	1.02	3.3	1.36
Principal contribution to consistent implementation of benchmark assessments in classrooms	4.1	1.35	3.6	1.28

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Low, 5 = High); principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

between a '2' (low capacity) and '3' (medium capacity) or between a '3' and '4' (high capacity; see Table 7).[20]

High capacities

Staff and principals acknowledged high capacity on only the same 9 survey items (13 %), which were scored as a '4' or '5'. Despite limitations in community relationships, respondents believed the principal was accountable for involving parents and the community in the school ($M_p = 4.0$, $SD_p = .97$; $M_s = 3.9$, $SD_s = .93$) and that the school also respected students' cultural backgrounds ($M_p = 4.1$, $SD_p = .84$; $M_s = 3.9$, $SD_s = 1.10$).

Respondents were consistent in their recognition of principal awareness of local, district, and state accountability pressures (see Table 8). Additionally, the school was considered a safe environment ($M_p = 4.1$, $SD_p = .73$; $M_s = 4.1$, $SD_s = .64$) and that the principal made significant contributions to this effort ($M_p = 4.4$, $SD_p = .69$; $M_s = 4.3$, $SD_s = .82$). Respondents indicated the use of curriculum maps ($M_p = 4.1$, $SD_p = 1.08$; $M_s = 3.9$, $SD_s = 1.10$) and that the principal made positive efforts to communicate school results to the teaching staff ($M_p = 4.2$, $SD_p = .80$; $M_s = 3.9$, $SD_s = .95$).[21] Some capacity-building assessment literacy practices were evident and were complemented by important contributions of the principal (see Table 9). Mandated benchmark assessments were a priority as well as sharing of assessment data with all staff. Principals were also perceived to contributing to these tasks. Similarly, respondents reported strong principal influence on high self-expectations ($M_p = 4.1$, $SD_p = .89$; $M_s = 4.0$, $SD_s = .94$), teacher collaboration for student achievement ($M_p = 4.1$, $SD_p = .77$; $M_s = 4.0$, $SD_s = .81$), and decision-making about the direction of the school ($M_p = 4.1$, $SD_p = .87$; $M_s = 3.8$, $SD_s = .96$).

[20] We reasoned that a mean difference of .5 or more suggested considerable disagreement when participant groups (principals, teachers), on average, identified with two different categories or responses.

[21] We considered, in some instances, a staff mean of 3.9 as 'high capacity' when the principal mean was at least a '4' and the mean difference was less than .5.

Table 8 Principal awareness of accountability pressures (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Principal feels accountable to stakeholders	4.0	1.00	4.1	.86
Principal feels accountable in implementing policy	4.3	1.07	4.2	.85
Principal feels accountable to district for monitoring of student outcomes	4.4	.97	4.4	.80
Principal feels accountable to district administration for student achievement	4.4	.95	4.5	.70
Principal feels accountable for ensuring AZ learning standards are met	4.5	.74	4.4	.74
Principal feels accountable for ethically-responsible behavior for student needs	4.6	.61	4.3	.78

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Low, 5 = High); principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

Table 9 Successful assessment literacy practices (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Mandated benchmark assessments	4.2	1.26	3.9	1.3
Assessment data shared with all school staff	4.3	.95	4.0	.88
Principal contributes to sharing of assessment data with all school staff	4.5	.82	4.1	.77
Principal contributes to school-wide goals based on assessment data	4.1	1.01	3.9	.97

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Low, 5 = High); principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

Principal respondents gave themselves high-capacity scores on the majority (81 %) of 16 additional Likert-scale items on the principal survey only. First, principals considered themselves as instrumental in cultivating a supportive professional atmosphere (see Table 10). They gave themselves rather high scores concerning their capacity-building efforts to help people feel honored and thrive (Mitchell and Sackney 2009). They fostered respect, self-reflection, modeled professional attributes, and expected the same for others. Second, principals noted confidence in enabling staff commitment to positive change (see Table 11). As stewards of the vision, principals believed they fostered a climate of ongoing renewal and improvement (Mitchell and Sackney 2009). Additionally, respondents indicated few tensions they experience related to their work in schools (see Table 12).[22] They felt rather insulated from pressures that may cause some to choose between competing values, prioritize compliance with district requirements over doing what is best for students, or to avoid participation outside the school (e.g., committees, professional development) altogether.

Therefore, while quantitative findings suggest principals possessed high self-capacity for developing people, commitments, setting direction, and effectively managing some aspects of the instructional program within their schools, these

[22] In this case, mean scores in '1' or '2' categories indicate low feelings of tension about these items.

Table 10 Principals' self-reported influence on cultivating supportive professional atmosphere (N = 35)

Survey item	M	SD
Respect all staff	4.6	.49
Respect all students	4.7	.44
Self-reflective	4.3	.66
Treat staffs as professionals	4.6	.55
Hold high expectations of others	4.4	.56
Act as role model and lead learner	4.5	.56

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Never, 5 = Often)

Table 11 Principals' self-reported influence on enabling staff commitment to positive change (N = 35)

Survey item	M	SD
Hopeful about improvement	4.8	.43
Gives sense of purpose to school	4.3	.62
Initiates new projects	4.1	.87
Plan strategically for the future	4.0	.77
Offer innovative ways of doing things	4.0	.62
Self-belief in ability to make a difference	4.7	.47
Promote democratic principles	4.2	.66

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Never, 5 = Often)

Table 12 Extent of shared inherent tensions (N = 62)

Survey item	(n = 35)		(n = 27)	
	M_p	SD_p	M_s	SD_s
Tensions between district requirements and what is best for students	2.8	1.07	2.6	1.11
Tensions choosing between competing values	2.6	.98	2.4	1.05
Tensions present at school vs. participating outside school	2.9	1.26	2.4	1.34

Mean score of respondent on Likert-scale item (1 = Never, 5 = Always); Principal respondents are indicated by a subscript *p* and subscript *s* for staff respondents

views were not equally shared by staff. Most capacities for building sustainable improvement at the beginning of the intervention period ranged from low to medium and revealed certain discrepancies or weaknesses. Subjects manifested a keen awareness of accountability pressures and ability comply with mandates that required use of some practices necessary for curriculum change (e.g., curriculum maps, benchmarks) although they had difficulties in defining success. Subjects valued a supportive, professional, collaborative, and democratic working environment in their schools but lacked deep-rooted connections with their communities nor seemed to value their contributions or support.

Qualitative findings

Qualitative findings extend the description of key discrepancies noted in the quantitative section in ways that suggest limited participant understanding about capacity building for curriculum change and sustainable improvement although interviews were conducted later in the intervention process. Indeed, many participants suggested that their schools were in transition and that they were at various stages of developing capacity for change with some improvement related to intervention efforts. While principals and teacher leaders reported that their schools were making positive changes regarding formative assessments, data use, and growth in some community interactions, they were largely lacking in more authentic forms of engagement. Participants also reported the need to move beyond their low capacity status and develop into a high capacity learning community school although quantitative and qualitative findings together suggest they were cognizant of their micro-level (Mitchell and Sackney 2009) practices but described little consciousness of the broader socio-cultural dimension and cultural-political shifts in developing the potential for sustainable improvement in the Arizona context (Ylimaki et al. 2012). The varied implementation of PLCs comparable to the level of anxiety for meeting accountability expectations evident in the multiple and sometimes conflicting district priorities, range of instructional leadership perspectives, and levels of resistance challenged consideration beyond school walls. In many cases, priorities shifted away from building authentic and culturally respectful relationships with families and communities, which served only to reinforce deficit thinking and lack of coherent direction within schools for collaboration and cultural relevancy. In this section, findings about low capacity and developing processes will be discussed in terms of four emergent themes: (1) varied definitions of instructional leadership; (2) the extent of implementation and development of professional learning communities; (3) understanding of community engagement; (4) barriers to change.

Varied definitions of instructional leadership

When asked to provide their definition of instructional leadership, principals and staff responded in two primary ways: instructional leadership as formal administrative role and instructional leadership as a capacity for sustainable improvement. While some emphasized that instructional leadership is the sole role of administration, others talked about instructional leadership in terms of capacity or shared with others in collaborative teams. Definitions about instructional leadership guided their leadership practices, particularly in terms of PLC implementation and community engagement.

Instructional leader as principal's role

Participants who emphasized individualized instructional leadership focused on their administrative roles in leading the curriculum and instructional development at their schools. They tended to answer the question of defining instructional

leadership in "I" statements. For example, a charter school principal responded that, "I'm looking at the bigger picture. I'm looking at the curriculum. I'm looking at how everybody is approaching the kids and what they can do differently."

For others, the principal's role as an instructional leader centers on her/his abilities to monitor instruction and staff/student interactions. More specifically, participants defined this role in terms of direct supervision and management. For example, one principal noted that instructional leadership meant "ensuring teachers are doing their best, that the students are actually learning from the method the teacher is using, and that students are not being abused in some way." Similarly, a high school assistant principal emphasized that her role as an instructional leader is to confront ineffective instructional practice. She indicated, "if they're not using effective practices, we [administration] step in and make sure they do, in whatever way that happens." Responses exemplify a managerial, neoconservative discourse, as well as a lack of trust between the principal and school staff. Principals take on a directive approach when they determine instructional practices do not conform to expectations promoted by the accountability culture. In addition, principals make the assumption that expectations of conformity invite teacher resistance, which need to be identified, addressed, and rooted out.

In some contrast to the individual, managerial, approach to instructional leadership, others defined it in terms of collaborative practices and capacity building. For one elementary principal, the locus of control for instructional leadership went beyond her role as the principal. She maintained that agency for instructional leadership should also include "the facilitators and the paraprofessionals. It's the anybody who touches the child in their educational career." For her, the principal's role was "to help build that [instructional leadership capacity] within them." Others similarly defined instructional leadership as an interdependent team effort consistent with Mitchell and Sackney (2009). As one elementary principal stated, "It should be building the capacity of everybody. We are an interdependent team of instructional leaders."

While most of the definitions of collaboration defined instructional leadership in terms of the school staff, only one principal extended the definition to the other stakeholders. She defined instructional leadership as a collaborative practice:

> where a group of people—teachers, support staff, administrators, and parents as—stakeholders come together to evaluate their mission and vision, and where they want to focus, and where they want to go with the school.

As Mitchell and Sackney (2009) noted, capacity building involves shared vision and a collaborative work culture. In these narratives, we hear principals and teachers exhibit an emergent understanding of shared instructional leadership work on shared vision, a collaborative culture, and an interdependent team effort consistent building with a community of within the school (Mitchell and Sackney 2009).

The varied and sometimes contrasting definitions of instructional leadership appeared to have a direct impact on the level of a shared ethos for collaboration in each school (Mitchell and Sackney 2009). Participant understandings of the nature of instructional leadership, characterized by one teacher leader, determines "how you define the school, and how you take that role of not necessarily the leader, but

how you build that collaboration with everybody to focus what your true priorities are for the school." The nature of instructional leadership enabled the extent of collaboration among staff "to really understand that we are here to serve a common mission," which "has to be built around the values of the school, the community." Instructional leadership practices also had implications for capacity building and the functioning of PLCs, a model that many of the schools have adopted to address their position in the school improvement cycle. In the next section, varied levels of PLC implementation and development will be discussed.

Professional learning communities

Participants highlighted the use of PLCs to build capacity and drive the use of formative assessments and other data (e.g. state test results) for instructional decisions. As Mitchell and Sackney (2009) noted, data-based decision-making, a commitment to continuous improvement, and a results orientation are essential elements of collective inquiry and learning. For principals of Tier III schools, data-based decision-making is essential to make adequate yearly progress on standardized tests. While the majority of participants identified some level of engagement in the development and implementation of PLCs (Leithwood and Riehl 2003, 2005) they were at varying levels of implementation. These varying levels ranged from starting discussions based on adjusting the master schedule to beginning PLCs to simply provide time (e.g. time was available; however, teachers did not meet regularly to discuss student achievement), and finally, to structuring both time and expectations for teachers to collaborate about school practices and student achievement based upon data.

Some participants noted that the development of PLCs were in their initial stages. For example, some participants have started to look at how they can implement PLCs into practice at their schools. As one principal noted, "We have looked at how we instruct our students, how we build community within our school." Similarly, another principal stated that she implemented PLCs at each of her campuses. However, principals in the beginning stages of PLC implementation defined the implementation of PLCs as "an ongoing process" and "slow going." For others, the process, although slow is better than what previously existed. An elementary school principal discussed the chaos prior to initiating a professional learning community model at her school. In the past, "we were always flying by the seat of our pants and this year the school is focusing on building the culture."

While some participants were in the beginning stages of implementing PLCs, some were unable to "fit it into" current practices. One principal stated, "I think it is something that has to start small and build before it goes system wide. We just don't have the time to put one more thing on teachers' plates" referring to collaboration around data in their PLCs. Likewise, a superintendent/principal identified a lack of time and other mandates as her rationale for not promoting PLCs at this time. According to her, the school is going to collaborate next summer "to work on curriculum mapping, pacing guides, and creating our own formative assessments."

Other participants have had difficulty and unexpected outcomes in their transition from independent to interdependent professional learning communities. According

to a middle school principal who has been promoting PLCs at her school for several years, "the biggest challenge has been from re-culturing the school from that old industrial model into a professional learning community." Another principal found that collaboration in professional learning communities brought to light areas that were in need of focus that went undiscovered until teachers worked together. He stated that PLCs "forced us to look a little bit deeper at our data. That was kind of alarming…We maybe had that before and really didn't focus on it." Yet Mitchell and Sackney (2009) argued that high-capacity school members have difficult conversations about their practice. Likewise, Ylimaki and Brunner (2011) found conflict as an essential part of any effective collaboration aimed at curriculum improvement.

Other participants saw the implementation of PLCs as an experience that changed the way that they viewed leadership and the role of the entire school staff. For a high school assistant principal, PLCs are:

> really looking at how you define the school, and how you take the role of not necessarily the leader, but how you build that collaboration with everybody to focus on what your true priorities are for the school.

While PLC implementation caused some participants to transform practices from independent decision-making to collaborative decision-making (Leithwood and Riehl 2003, 2005), one principal highlighted the difficulty in implementing the PLC model when school staff is not interested in collaboration. She, in turn, has taken a directive approach to force compliance with the professional learning community she has begun at her school. For her, non-compliant staff has no place in her school. She stated, "Those who don't, who push away from their own personal accountability and their choices, they are team members who are on their way out unless they change their philosophy."

Despite the struggles implementing professional learning communities, some principals responded that the PLC model has made a positive impact on their school and staff practices. An elementary school principal reported that, "It's given them [teachers] more structure for knowing what to do with data and then having the trust with each other and with the administration that we are going to do what we need to do. For a middle school principal, transitioning from more traditional professional development to a PLC has improved instructional practices and focused staff. "Everybody is more on the same page." In other words, these schools are clearly beginning the process of developing a shared vision for change.

Yet, there were several examples where schools were unlikely to develop high capacity learning community schools because "the principal lacks trust in the staff," "the principal wants to control the decision-making," and "staff bullying others into decisions." One principal exemplified a lack of trust in her school staff and the school's students when she stated, "I can't get away today because there's going to be some sort of chaos, some blowup, and the only time they behave is when I'm there." Here the principal is also struggling with moving from a conception of "principal as individual instructional leader" to "instructional leadership as a capacity for curriculum improvement."

Another principal could not release authority over her staff. Instead, she dictated what the teachers would do and remained closed to the idea that others had something to contribute to the discussion. She recalled a PLC meeting where several teachers had opposing views. She recalled teachers "not really being upset when they left the meeting because they didn't agree with me, and my decision is right."

For another principal, the staff had dysfunction in collaborative work that seemed to be accepted and/or overlooked. "Each grade level has only three teachers per grade level. It's not a big battle because two will tell the other one this is what we're doing." To her, this practice seemed normal and created efficiency although, in actuality, it suggested willful suppression of open, reflective dialogue, individual worth, and the creative energy in collaboration vital to high capacity schools (Mitchell and Sackney 2009).

While many of the schools are engaged in various levels of implementing PLCs at their school sites, a few of the schools have attempted to involve the external community into their practices. Some have had little success engaging the community while some have made strides to improve their relationships with outside stakeholders although sometimes at the expense of other priorities without more purposeful connection to the classroom.

Extent of community engagement

Many participants discussed the importance of engaging the external community (Leithwood and Riehl 2003, 2005); however, few principals or teacher leaders had been able to bridge the external community with efforts at the school. An instructional coach at an elementary school reported that she sees the value in engaging the community, but trust issues with the community have made this difficult. She noted that a lack of consistency in leadership had been responsible although she wished the school "could find a way to connect with the community and be hand in hand." Frequent leadership changes not only undermined trust held by the staff and teachers, which led to further loss of trust on the part of the community.

Others noted that the geographic constraints of the school's context created difficulties in forming partnerships. Interestingly, at the same time, many participants/leaders equated community engagement with the formation of business partnerships. One principal noted, "Getting community involvement is almost impossible" because "there may be one or two businesses." Another principal stated that the limited businesses in the area create difficulty in engaging the community. "We have a certain set of businesses that are all about the school. Other businesses have no desire to be a part of us or to help us." Furthermore, some participants identified a lack of school capacity as a barrier to community engagement. An assistant principal highlighted this point when he said:

> I don't know if we are quite ready to reach out into the community and build those partnerships at this point because we are still struggling with our own culture within our school and building that core mission and those core values that we all expect.

While some of the schools identified a lack of business partners as a deficit to engaging the community, others have reached out in different ways. One school uses unofficial newspapers to promote school events and accomplishments. Others reported that they were better served by working directly with parents. One principal stated that she does "7:00 phone calls and home-visits" to reach out to constituents. Another principal differentiated between parental engagement and involvement. His school has restructured parent nights into interactive parent nights where families learn from students and teachers and take home tangible projects to work on with students at home. He referred to family nights to "break down barriers and get parents in." Each grade level created interactive activities and "parents got to take manipulatives, games, or strategies home so that they can help the students depending on what their needs were." In other words, for these principals, community involvement is equated with rather traditional parent involvement activities or obtaining resources from businesses. And while parent involvement is clearly important for school and student success (Johnson 2007), high capacity schools are characterized by authentic community engagement, meaning that multiple stakeholders (i.e., students, families, and other community members) are deeply respected and valued by teachers and administrators to effectively and responsibly to shape the direction of the school (Mitchell and Sackney 2009).

While many participants seemed to be developing their own collaborative school cultures, attempting to partner with businesses, or engaging parents, several schools have developed more authentic partnerships with the community. For instance, one school enlisted an area mariachi troupe to work with their students. The lead teacher stated, the troupe, including students, has "lessons and practice on our campus. And when we have parent nights and they're in here performing." This has had the benefit of drawing in parents and making the school more culturally relevant. Another school has used its rural location to partner with the area 4H and city recreation league. According to the principal, these partnerships have allowed the school to look at "the success of a child not just academically, but holistically….beyond just can they fill in the right circle on the test?"

Although some schools have had limited success developing partnerships and engaging the community, one school leader conceptualized community engagement in terms of community events "that happened on our school premises where we have our basketball courts, and where we have; it's—it's just a unique thing where we open these gates and now it's part of the community." However, the school experienced unexpected negative outcomes from its scheduling of 150 community events including field trips, community events at the school, and lessons from area organizations. The principal reported that the school "went a little overboard… a little overboard because we have to maintain the level of content in the classes. And so, we can't keep pulling them out" for various community activities. They did not purposely bridge the content of the classroom with experiences in the community or were not strategic about aligning community activities with the curriculum. Failure to connect community experiences to instruction diverted time away from a focus on standards, and priorities from improvement plans informed by data.

Despite efforts to develop PLCs and engage the community, qualitative results indicated that the schools displayed low to medium capacity in their responses

consistent with quantitative findings. Dialogue about building positive community relationships, however, has been emerging in these schools as well as some initial efforts although more authentic forms of engagement driven by deep consciousness of the socio-cultural context have not yet come to fruition. Multiple barriers within schools and districts, however, often thwarted attempts to make authentic changes even despite an emerging awareness. In the next section, participant responses regarding barriers to building capacity are presented.

Barriers to change

Participants identified several barriers to building capacity that must be overcome in order to move their schools out of Tier III. These barriers include the need to change past perceptions and practices regarding teachers and the community, addressing socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts, district office practices, over dependency on formal authority, lack of trust, and staff turnover.

Changing past perceptions and practices

For one elementary turnaround principal, changing past perceptions about successful teaching provides him with his largest hurdle and is based on a prior evaluation system that discounted achievement data as a component of teacher evaluation. In other words, the principal previously used only anecdotal evidence to evaluate instruction, which always informed teachers they were doing a great job until the changed emphasis on integrating data. According to the principal, "They [teachers] were told they were doing well, but they were never using data and results to see where they really were." As a result, he began restructuring the evaluation of teachers to emphasize "success" as defined in NCLB and Race to the Top. Similarly, an elementary principal noted that teaching practices were not aligned with effective instruction. This was the barrier that she wished to address. "The students' knowledge is vastly superior and what we need to do is bring our teachers up to teaching at that level…Some are getting there based on their pure talents, not because we are helping them get there." And while these principals' narratives clearly fall short of Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) notions of knowledge systems and data-based decision making, focus on reflective practice and experimentation in high-capacity schools, these schools are under tremendous pressure to get out of "school improvement status" and attain high performance labels.

Some participants identified the need to transform past beliefs about "successful" teaching practices, but others identified the deficit thinking of staff and the community as their largest barrier. For example, one principal stated "The preconceived notion has been talking about 'those' students, 'those' (i.e. Latino/a, Native American) kids; from the community, from the children, and unfortunately from some educators on staff as well." An elementary teacher highlighted this type of deficit-thinking when confronting a peer about the belief that educating all students was an impossible task. When recounting the story, she recalled her statement to her peer: "All right, out of your class of 22, do you believe that every single one of your students can learn? All right. Your job is to teach them." An

elementary principal recalled a similar experience where she took a directive approach with a teacher. She noted that she told the teacher that she was responsible for teaching all students, "I mean, this is what you are going to do or you may not have a job." She further commented that she had adapted her practice to confront these types of beliefs in a harsh manner because "you can't deal with hugs or even carrots with people who are unwilling to change." Here the principal asserts her authority as an instructional leader who can and will set high expectations. Yet in certain ways, this principal's narrative also reflects neoconservative and culturally neutral discourses. Anxiety for macro-level accountability pressures shaped perspectives about compliance that does not allow for individual beliefs about practice to run counter to prevailing expectations and what is constructed as legitimate. At the same time, disregard for individuality in pursuit of eliminating resistance may also reinforce neglect of culture and context, in which individuality and diversity are acknowledged, celebrated, and forms a vital part.

Addressing socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts

While some principals and teachers identified confronting deficit thinking as a major challenge, some principals explicitly identified their own deficit thinking as a barrier for change. The following quote exemplifies this deficit thinking:

> It's very important for us to try and help those students coming from those homes so that they have a better chance at the future. I live where the educated people live. And I said that if you get a good education, you can live down there too. [Principal in high Native population school]

In a sense, unknowingly, this principal has created a vision of her school and community that devalues the funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) and lived-experiences of the very students that she wishes to educate. Her comment overlooks important historical and social conditions that create real barriers outlined by another principal in a similar context. For a high school principal, the historical context provided the largest barrier for student success.

> I think that the challenge that we have is the history of education on the reservation with the BIA schools and the parochial schools that were established on the reservation. As a result, there is a kind of resistance, or maybe an undercurrent of resistance to education.

An assistant principal similarly noted that the disconnect between the school and community culture creates the biggest barrier. "I think that our biggest challenge is dealing with a culture that is kind of removed…because their life on the reservation is quite different from the dominant culture."

Inconsistent district support and directives

Although some participants clearly recognized internal school barriers to capacity building, another recurrent theme centered on the role that the district office plays in

allowing change to occur. For some principals, it was the lack of district support for new knowledge implementation that created a barrier:

> We don't get to continue those collaborative discussions that then get our superintendent, or our assistant superintendent, or our staff development person involved. Which really, in order to implement those things that we discussed here [institutes], we really need those people on board as well

Others identified a lack of follow-through by district office personnel as a barrier to building capacity across the district. Lack of district follow-through was exemplified by two participant's responses. The first stated, "We have only two schools participating and we were supposed to have four. It's just the inconsistencies that we have as a district." Participation was not a clear priority of the district. Participants observed that districts were too disorganized, lacking in effective communication, or overwhelmed with too many competing demands to encourage participation and give adequate support. The second commented, "We started with the superintendent and other principals and now we are the only ones left. We feel like they are missing the boat." Lack of central office attention and follow-through made it difficult to carry on the dialogue at the district level about the value of the intervention participants received for free. Many did not believe their interest and enthusiasm for improvement was equally shared in the district.

Still others identified the overwhelming amount of mandates as a barrier to change. The pressure of implementing a plethora of initiatives has led to a lack of follow-through. Statements such as "We had a lot of directives that threw teachers off this year" or "We have so many district initiatives that we can't focus on one thing" characterize participant perspectives that so many directives inhibit capacity to implement change with fidelity as there are so many competing priorities to address. Many participants acknowledged, however, that these criticisms were not universally shared by district officials. For example, one principal lamented, "We do so much professional development that we don't stick to any one item, and I know that the superintendent would disagree with that." Participants highlighted the inability of participating schools to build capacity around specific initiatives. Here district leadership transience and inconsistent support prevented some schools from moving beyond low capacity work.

Overdependency on formal authority, lack of trust, and teacher retention

While participants identified the district office as a barrier, several teachers noted that it was the school administrator (principal) who was the largest barrier to change reinforcing an overt overdependency on those with formal authority:

> If you don't have the administrative power to make the change, it's just the ideas are there, but your superintendent and your principal are essentially the only two who are going to make that change. I don't think that I've seen any change that has been positive yet. [Teacher]

Teachers similarly reported a lack of trust in staff decision making as a barrier to capacity building, which becomes more problematic when formal authority is not

driven by clear district priorities in these areas. Furthermore, staff turnover and difficulty attracting teachers were noted as barriers to many schools. One principal noted an 85 % turnover in staff has led to numerous conflicting professional development activities and low capacity. She stated that the turnover "means our professional development plan, which is a piece of this; we are having to go back and professionally develop our folks." Participants similarly complained of frequently having to start over in preparing new teachers to build up the same capacities for change that were lost with the departure of previous staff. Constant repetition of this process complicates uniform professional growth. Others in more rural areas emphasized that their school's location and isolation prevents attracting and retaining quality staff. "It's hard to attract teachers because we are in an isolated area and it's kind of a cultural shock…some adjust and some don't." Many school leaders/participants were in rural areas, and geography became a major barrier to professional networking and capacity building. At the same time, this quote reveals some deficit thinking about the socio-cultural context of Arizona schools generally and rural schools in particular.

Qualitative findings, thus, provided more in-depth description of participant understanding of capacity building for sustainable improvement as well as in areas needing development identified by quantitative findings. Participant responses indicated an emerging awareness of capacity building at the micro level although macro understanding of leadership in the socio-cultural dimension (Ylimaki et al. 2012) is indeed a complicating although potentially enabling dynamic. Participants interpreted priorities for compliance with accountability expectations in ways that neglected deep consideration of the socio-cultural context, which serves to only reinforce barriers (e.g., deficit-thinking, lack of trust, limited community engagement, resistance, long-term overdependency on formal authority, lack of coherent direction) in ways likely to inhibit potential for sustainable improvement.

Discussion and conclusion

This study yielded four primary findings: (1) schools were not at high-levels of capacity building; (2) those schools in process of building capacity for sustainable improvement demonstrated a directive leadership approach; (3) school development towards high capacity focused on micro-level processes (e.g., PLCs); and (4) little attention was given to leadership in the socio-cultural dimension. We elaborate on each of the primary findings.

Quantitative and qualitative findings indicated very little evidence of high capacity building as described by Mitchell and Sackney (2009). Quantitative findings highlight an increased focus on setting direction and vision, however, teacher surveys and interviews do not support the notion of *shared vision*. Whether participants indicated disagreement about assessment literacy practices, implementation of common formative assessments across all grade levels, or even in defining success, potential for shared vision was hindered by multiple interpretations of accountability pressures. Inconsistent district support and directives, varied and sometimes contrasting definitions about instructional leadership, and the challenges

for changing past perceptions and practices including elements of resistance to collaboration, made a "whole vision" of teaching and learning difficult to develop (Mitchell and Sackney, p. 138). Similarly, principal surveys and interviews revealed a higher level of collaborative work culture and collective learning than staff responses suggest. While we consider shared instructional leadership, collaborative culture, community building and interpendency within the school to be emerging, we are concerned about the varied levels of trust that hindered the ability of some schools to push capacity building forward in their schools.

Like previous research on leadership in challenging contexts (e.g., effective schools literature in the US, Alma Harris' research in the U.K., ISSPP, Jacobson et al. 2005) the principals used a directive leadership approach in building capacity for sustainable improvement. For instance, some school leaders placed numerous teachers on plans for improvement and exited several others. Principals also reported not being able to let go of authority, which is the antithesis of Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) description of sustainable PLCs. While a directive leadership approach has been effective for school turnaround processes, this approach reinforced a lack of trust among staff. The work of Day (2009) suggests that a temporary directive approach may be appropriate in challenging contexts to initially address problems with the physical environment, security, behavior, attendance, and in communicating expectations. In some cases, teachers were forced to resign. A directive approach in this short-term early stage, however, was intended only to secure widespread trust (i.e., staff, students, community) and ensure commitment to change that supports transition to a more inclusive, collaborative, and shared leadership agenda subsequently to follow (Day 2009). In this way, as Day points out, developing potential for sustainable improvement includes a layered approach in which capacities are built or "seeded" in prior phases as in the need or priority to cultivate trust, which are also central to strengthening community relationships and effectively integrating students from different social and cultural environments (p. 136).

Survey and interview responses completely overlooked the importance of leadership in the socio-cultural dimension (i.e., consciousness and awareness of the border context, and political environment; culturally responsive leadership capacity; and relationships in an ethic of community). Participants were encouraged, of course, to talk about their understanding of student demographics, background, and relationships with the community. We also assessed any omission on their part as an indication that this dimension in their assessment of capacity building practices is underdeveloped. While many demonstrated ultra-sensitivity to the accountability context, they were largely silent about the border context of their schools or the set of core values, beliefs, and commitments to improving the whole lives of children and primarily colonized communities. Understanding of demographics and student background took on a deficit-thinking perspective. Participants developed numerous activities to involve parents and the larger community but these activities were not authentic, culturally relevant, or tied to school vision and priorities. Given that many perceived barriers associated with geographic constraints, we did not hear participants express that multiple stakeholders (i.e., students, families, and other community members) are deeply respected and valued by teachers and

administrators to effectively and responsibly to shape the direction of the school (Mitchell and Sackney 2009). For example, schools did not authentically engage families and community members in the curriculum planning, formative assessments, or in developing the school's mission or vision. Schools also did not communicate deep understanding of assessment data or did not consider teacher, student, or parent voices to the extent necessary to achieve a truly democratic atmosphere, which enabled collaborative processes and exchange in an ethic of community or in which culturally responsive practices could be realized.

While we recognize that PLCs were still in their initial stages of development, evidence suggests that many viewed them as a welcome change. Despite difficulties and unexpected outcomes associated with "reculturing" the school or making the transition from independence to interdependency, PLCs positively impacted school and staff practices including the way leadership and the role of the entire school staff was viewed. In many ways, the work of participants in PLCs indicated emerging capacity for sustainable improvement. The problem, however, was that priorities on improving the micro-level process within PLCs hindered focus to effectively reach beyond school walls. Curriculum maps, mandated benchmark assessments, and surface use of data in PLCs took precedence over priorities for democratic collaborative processes and authentic community engagement. Complicated conversations about culture, race, ethnicity, and achievement gaps were largely avoided. Without these conversations, schools are limited in capacity for inclusion of students'/community culture and funds of knowledge in curriculum practices. In essence, school practices revolved around legitimated practices (i.e., professional learning communities) while discounting the socio-cultural processes required to move schools in these contexts out of school improvement (i.e., Tier III status).

This study is limited by the number of teacher participants per school. Participants were selected as leadership teams by the principal or the superintendent. Nonetheless, the survey return rate and high reliability suggests evidence of generalizability especially to participants in the leadership training partnership of which 81 % of principals and 73 % of staff completed the surveys. We expect survey findings to be generalizable to similar leadership teams in targeted Tier III schools given that fact that 73 % of those invited agreed to participate. The geographical school locations (i.e., rural, urban, suburban) of survey respondents were also fairly representative of schools participating in the training. We also suspect that diversity of principal and staff survey samples are also representative of Arizona principals and teachers. We recognize, however, the limitations of qualitative findings as the proportion of interview participants in the leadership training partnership was much smaller (37 % for principals, 35 % for staff, respectively) although they still provided the most complete view of their school's capacity in that they were full participants in all aspects of the intervention. Furthermore, the Arizona context is important because demographics foreshadow national trends. Also, schools across the US face accountability demands in culturally diverse communities. Therefore, our focus on Tier III schools to make improvement gains is relevant for research and practice. Future research implications include testing a leadership development model for Tier III schools that links

capacity building leadership and student achievement. Thus, the next generation of educational leaders must have the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and analytical tools to lead schools in both the accountability culture and the macro socio-cultural dimension.

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