

# **Puppets and Puppeteers: External Mandates and the Instructional Practice of Two First-Year Teachers**

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



**Ed Bengtson**  
*University of Arkansas*

**Sean P. Connors**  
*University of Arkansas*

*This longitudinal study examined how the approach leaders in two schools took to implementing the Common Core State Standards shaped the way that two first-year teachers constructed meaning related to being a teacher. Instructional leadership constructs and threat rigidity theory were used to analyze qualitative data gathered over a nine-month period. Findings indicate that the way schools as organizations respond to external mandates can influence the way that beginning teachers conceptualize, and approach, their work in the classroom.*

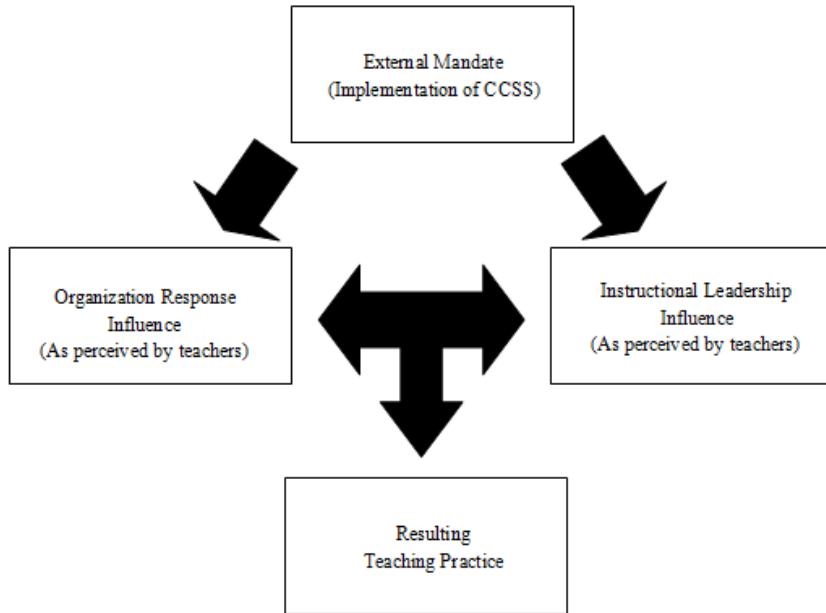
## **Introduction**

School leaders hold the onus of ensuring that students receive an adequate and meaningful education. This responsibility has increased the importance of instructional leadership which is driven, in part, by the school reform movement that imposes a phalanx of accountability measures on public schools internationally (Hallinger & Lee, 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). At the heart of the reform movement in the United States is the concept of standards, the most recent manifestation of which, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), is perceived by some as a strong attempt at a national curriculum (Tienken & Zhao, 2010). Others dispel this claim, arguing that the CCSS do not aim to establish a national curriculum, but rather define what “students should know and be able to do at the end of the year” (Rothman, 2011, para. 2).

In this paper, we are not concerned with the affordances and constraints of the CCSS. Instead, we examine the relationship between how schools as organizations implement the CCSS and the way that first-year teachers deliver instruction. Drawing on data from a longitudinal study that followed two beginning teachers through their first year of teaching, we argue that the way school leaders respond to external mandates such as the implementation of the CCSS can influence how beginning teachers conceptualize their work as teachers.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The study grew out of a larger grounded theory project (Bengtson & Connors, 2013) that necessitated a closer examination using the frameworks of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Southworth, 2002) and threat rigidity theory (Staw, Sanderland, & Dutton, 1981). In this sense, the conceptual framework for this paper emerged as we engaged in ongoing conversations with, and conducted observations of, the participants. True to the grounded theory approach, the sensitizing concepts of organizational response (i.e., threat rigidity) and instructional leadership experienced by the participants became our conceptual framework (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* The emerging theory that shows the relationship of the two emerging sensitizing concepts that formed the conceptual framework for the study.

The concept of threat rigidity, introduced by the seminal work of Staw, et al. (1981), and its relationship to instruction is the focus of this inquiry. The primary research question asked: How, if at all, does the way that organizations respond to the external mandate of implementing the CCSS influence how first-year English teachers deliver instruction? To answer this question, we conducted a two-case study in which two first-year English teachers were followed through their first year of teaching.

The prevailing trend in both leadership preparation programs and active principals' role expectations suggest that the ability of school leaders to influence the quality of instruction plays a key role in the leading of a successful school as measured by the current accountability mandates (Hallinger, 2005). Therefore, we identify instructional leadership as carrying the responsibility of guiding the change process required by the external mandate of implementing the CCSS, and our data gives us the opportunity to examine the nature of instructional leadership that is occurring in these two cases through the lens of our two participants' perspectives and descriptions of their reflected and observed experiences.

Secondly, we directed our attention to the way schools, as organizations, respond to the demands of implementation of the CCSS as it might be related to threat rigidity theory (Staw, et al., 1981). Again, it was through the perspectives of Elizabeth and Terry that drew us to understand that the manner in which organizations, and in this case the schools and their systems, responded to the required implementation of the CCSS influenced the way instruction occurred in the classrooms of these two novice teachers.

## **Instructional Leadership**

The implementation of the CCSS poses challenges for school leaders and teachers as it represents yet another educational reform initiative introduced with an expectation that schools will be held accountable for performance outcomes. With the increased emphasis given student performance on standardized tests, the school principal has been identified as second only to classroom teachers as an influence to student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, & Wahlstrom, 2004). More recently, instructional leadership has been found to be a fundamental contributor to student achievement (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Therefore, we argue that instructional leadership plays a significant role in the implementation of any initiative that is designed to improve student achievement.

Instructional leadership emerged from research on effective schools in the early 1980s (Hallinger, 2003). Since then, increased accountability for school performance has drawn attention to how school administrators lead instruction. Interestingly, there is still a question as to what instructional leadership really looks like, as there are contradictory criteria and characteristics that have led to a sense of vagueness regarding what constitutes sound instructional leadership and what does not (Rigby, 2014). For example, Hallinger (2003) highlights one popular image that suggests that, “instructional leadership focuses predominantly on the role of the school principal in coordinating, controlling, supervising, and developing curriculum and instruction in the school” (p. 331). Of concern here is the concept of *controlling* instruction and the extent to which this conflicts with the professionalism of teachers (Kohl, 2009; Milner, 2013).

Contrasting the idea that instructional leadership is a top-down practice that controls instruction, Southworth (2002) emphasizes the nurturing of effective two-way communication regarding teaching and learning issues amongst all educators in a collaborative school community as a critical characteristic of instructional leadership. In such a culture, open debate about student learning issues is considered essential. Effective instructional leadership allows teachers to “build repertoires of flexible alternatives rather than collecting rigid teaching procedures and methods” (Blase & Blase, 1999, p. 359). Instructional leadership grants teachers the flexibility to develop a variety of approaches to instruction that can better accommodate the needs of the learner in a given context (Hoy & Hoy, 2003; Mombourquette & Bedard, 2014).

The proposition of giving teachers the latitude to make decisions calls into question the level of “control” that is presented by Hallinger (2003). Furthermore, a model of instructional leadership consistent with Southworth’s (2002) vision should embrace student-centered teaching strategies which are more constructive in nature than traditional teacher-centered strategies (Nelson & Sassi, 2005). In the present accountability era, the failure of principals to be effective instructional leaders might be attributed to how they (or their systems) respond to external mandates such as the CCSS.

## **Threat Rigidity**

As conceptualized by Staw, et al. (1981), threat rigidity describes how organizations respond to external threats. According to threat rigidity theory, organizations that

perceive themselves as coming under attack by outside forces may respond in an inflexible manner. From an open systems perspective, the goals of the organization shift from the organization's stated goals to the primary goal of survival (Scott, 2002). As a threat becomes more prevalent, organizations that respond in a rigid way are less likely to tolerate risk-taking practices (Shimizu, 2007), resulting in a "constriction of control, such that the opinions of the dominant members may prevail and their influence may become more centralized. Such changes in information and control processes may, of course, lead to faulty group decision making" (Staw, et al., 1981, p. 511). Importantly, the way an organization responds to external threats shapes expectations concerning how workers perform their duties and responsibilities as the work of the organization unfolds.

Olsen and Sexton (2009) examined threat rigidity in regard to a California high school labeled underperforming by the surrounding community. While they did not consider the influence that threat rigidity had specifically on beginning teachers, they did identify recurring patterns in the way that school leaders responded to outside threats (e.g., school closure, loss of jobs, critique from the larger community). These included pressure on teachers to conform to a prescribed way of teaching; constricted communication; administrator favoritism toward new teachers as a result of their perceived malleability; valuation of teacher conformity; an increase in administrative control; and a corresponding decrease in teacher autonomy.

Having studied the relationship between rigid response and school leadership, Daly (2009) surmised that there are dimensions of leadership that contribute to a decrease in threat rigidity. Trust, shared decision making, and the encouragement of diverse opinions and innovation were found to be predictors of less rigid responses to outside threats. In contrast, restriction of innovative thought, top-down delivery of expectations and mandates, and a constriction of communication were identified as characteristics of rigid responses. We see these characteristics of a rigid response as being contrary to effective instructional leadership.

### **Context of the Study**

This longitudinal study examined how the experiences and perceptions of two first-year English teachers were influenced by the expectations placed on them by their respective school administrations. Purposeful sampling was used to identify two participants who were starting their first year of teaching and who had recently completed the same teacher preparation program. Both of the participants – one male (Terry), and the other female (Elizabeth) – graduated from the same graduate teacher education program in 2012. As students in the program, the participants took the same courses, completed three student teaching rotations over the course of one year, and were observed by the same supervisor throughout their student teaching practicum. Moreover, university faculty identified them both as strong English teachers with promising career trajectories. After graduating, the participants accepted positions teaching middle-level English language arts in two school systems, one rural and the other suburban.

**Elizabeth.** As a non-traditional student, Elizabeth came into teaching after having changed careers. During her time in the teacher preparation program, Elizabeth was

described by the faculty as someone who could be trusted to complete all assignments with thoroughness, and, according to her university faculty supervisors, she had developed the ability to successfully enact student-center teaching methods that were promoted by her preparation program. It was during her third (and final) rotation of her student teaching experience that Elizabeth was asked to fill in as a long-term substitute at Heights Junior High School. At the end of the 2011-2012 school year, Elizabeth was offered a full-time teaching position at Heights.

**Terry.** As a more traditional student, Terry entered the graduate teacher preparation program immediately after completing his four-year undergraduate degree in English. Like Elizabeth, Terry was highly regarded by the both university faculty and his peers. He was considered a bright student with a keen intellect and he exhibited a desire to learn about teaching English, as evidenced by his interest and involvement with national professional teaching association conferences as a graduate student. Although Terry admitted to having experienced a more traditional, teacher-centric view of teaching when he first started the graduate preparation program, he came to appreciate, and then embrace, the constructivist student-centered approach supported by the university graduate teacher preparation program. Terry was hired to teach 8th-grade English/Language Arts at Brownsville Middle School starting in August of 2012.

### **The Research Sites**

The research sites were situated within easy driving distance of the university campus which proved optimal for the researchers as the study design required multiple visits to each site. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the two schools. Heights Junior High School, one of two junior high schools in the larger school system, is situated in a small city of approximately 75,000 and is nestled in an established suburban-style neighborhood made up of middle income, ranch style homes. Among the families served by the school system were parents who were employed by the local university. Elizabeth was the newest of three 9<sup>th</sup>-grade English teachers at Heights Junior High School.

Brownsville Middle School, in contrast to Heights Junior High School, is a small school that is typical of many rural school systems in the state. The town of Brownsville has a population of approximately 1,300 made up of primarily working-class families. All three of the Brownsville schools are located on the same small campus. Terry was hired as the lone 8<sup>th</sup>-grade English/Language Arts teacher in the middle school.

Table 1.

*Descriptive Data on Research Sites*

	Grade levels	Student enrollment	White Students	Free and Reduced Lunch	AYP Status
Heights JHS	8-9	720	82%	24%	“Achieving”
Brownsville MS	5-8	268	91%	63%	“Needs Improvement”

**Elizabeth and Terry’s Teacher Preparation Program**

Situated at the state’s flagship university, the graduate teacher education program Elizabeth and Terry completed is a yearlong licensure program that culminates in students’ earning a Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Like students in other teacher education programs in the United States, Elizabeth and Terry were encouraged to practice student-centered, constructivist teaching. Students begin taking classes in July and complete their program of study the following May. During that time they meet weekly with faculty of their university. The remainder of their time is spent completing a prolonged field experience that places them with mentor teachers in three different school systems. Students in the program consequently graduate having interned for a total of 33 weeks in both suburban and rural schools. Faculty, alumni, and school personnel routinely cite the field experience component as the program’s greatest asset, as it ensures that interns enter the job-market having gained a full year of teaching experience.

**Method**

Qualitative inquiry requires researchers to be instruments of inquiry which calls for direct involvement in the design of the study, data collection, and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). We believe that, as researchers, being immersed in these three processes allows for the opportunity of thorough and informed interpretation (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

**Study Design**

To gain a deep understanding of how Elizabeth and Terry constructed what it meant to be a teacher in the context of their respective schools and school systems, we determined

that it was important to design a study that would allow us to spend time with the participants. That is, to not only have multiple conversations, but to also observe both participants on a recurring basis throughout their first year of teaching. This immersion in the field over a period of nine months allowed us to get an extensive view of Elizabeth's and Terry's experiences during their first year of teaching. The study design was focused on how the participants experiences of being a teacher, and how that experience influenced their construction of what it meant to be a teacher.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected using methods associated with qualitative research, including: an initial semi-structured interview; monthly observations of the participants teaching; open conversations with each of the participants immediately following each observation; collected artifacts the participants volunteered to share; and email correspondence (See Table 2). Field notes were taken during each of the observations. All conversations and initial semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their entirety.

**Table 2.**  
*Summary of Data Sources and Analyses*

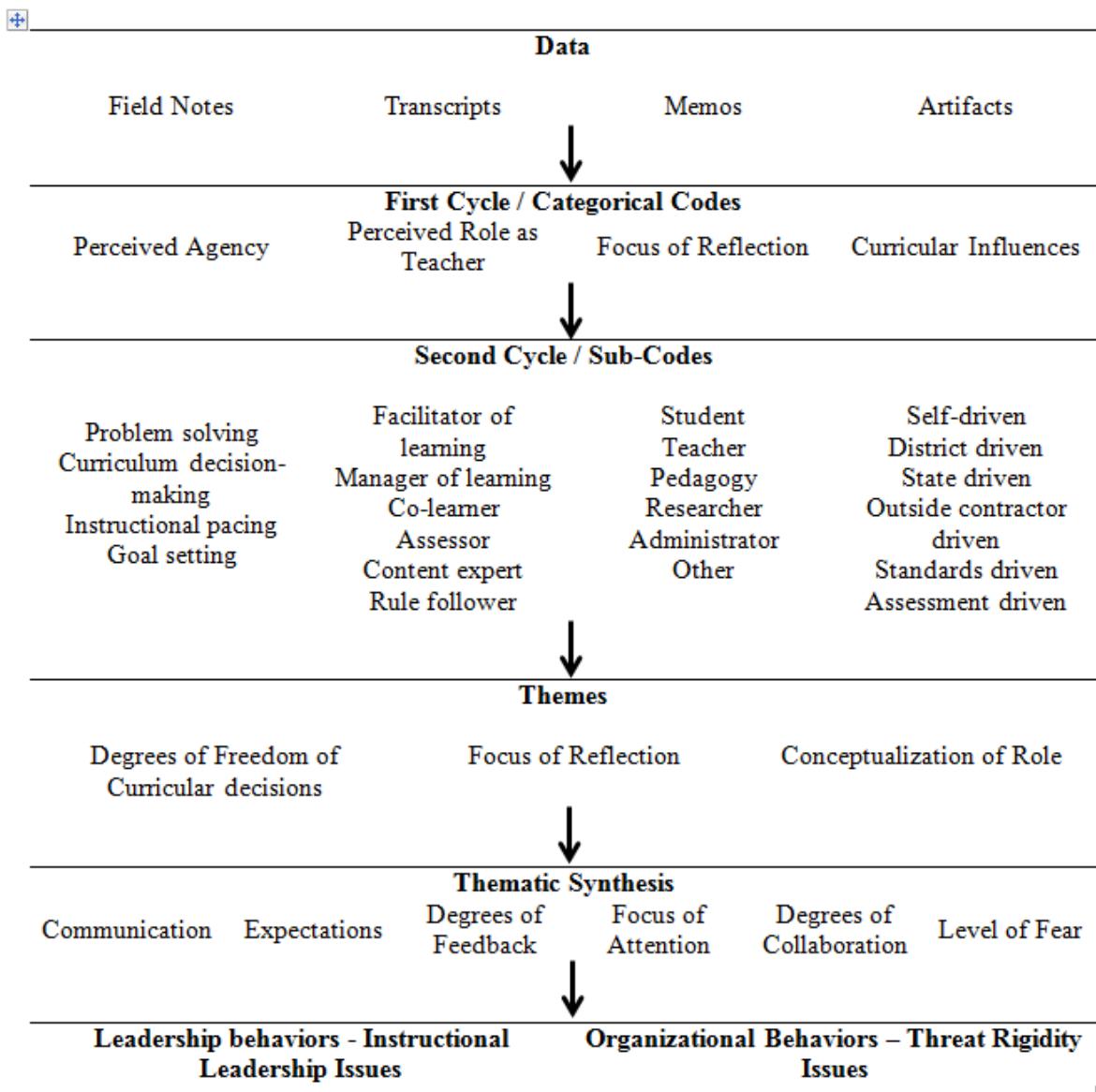
<b>Sources of Data</b>	<b>Focus of Analysis</b>
Initial interview (N=1 per participant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perceptions of teacher education program</li> <li>- Initial perceptions of new school</li> <li>- Goals for teaching English language arts</li> </ul>
Classroom observations during first year of teaching (N=6 per participant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instructional methods and decisions</li> <li>- Social context of teaching</li> </ul>
Post-observation conversations (N=6 per participant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decisions made during observed lesson</li> <li>- Self-evaluation of lessons</li> <li>- Social context of teaching</li> <li>- District, school, and departmental issues</li> <li>- Sources of influence on teaching</li> <li>- Perceived agency to make curricular changes</li> </ul>
Artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, instructional materials, district/school policies, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evidence for planning</li> <li>- Sources of influence on teaching</li> <li>- Evidence of teaching orientation (i.e., constructivist, transmission)</li> </ul>

The conversations with Terry and Elizabeth were purposefully designed to be open-ended with the dialogue often starting with “So, tell us how this past month has gone?” or simply, “How are things going?” Without exception, the conversations unfolded into exchanges that lasted up to an hour in length. Transcriptions were completed as soon as possible following each interview/conversation. The observations were scheduled so that Elizabeth and Terry could be observed teaching the same group of students over the course of the year. This also allowed for us to meet with them immediately after observing the class session.

## **Data Analysis**

As researchers, we found great value in meeting weekly to discuss the data, and we feel strongly that one of the strengths of this study was the abundance of debate and argument between the two of us as we moved toward making sense of the data. These weekly research meetings also allowed us to identify concepts and ideas to be pursued, if subsequent conversations with the participants permitted, to check for understanding (i.e., member checking). Initial analysis of the interview and conversation transcripts involved open coding that was descriptive in nature. This was followed by a second cycle of sub-coding (Saldaña, 2013) as we determined that the initial codes were more categorical in nature (e.g. the categorical code of “curricular influences” was fractured into multiple sub-codes such as “curricular influences: district driven,” “curricular influences: self-driven,” etc.). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the analysis process.

While Figure 2 appears to be highly sequential with distinct steps in the analysis process, the reader is reminded that, as with all qualitative analysis of this type, there was a constant recursive movement between elements of the analysis. Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was ongoing during weekly meetings throughout the coding process. The authors subsequently determined that the frameworks of instructional leadership and threat rigidity theory were useful in further interpreting the thematic findings that emerged in regard to the research question this study sought to answer.



*Figure 2.* The data analysis flow leading to the initial findings reflecting three themes and eventually arriving at issues of instructional leadership and threat rigidity.

Given the considerable differences in how Elizabeth and Terry made sense of being a teacher, and consequently how they performed their work, we were compelled to tackle the obvious question: Why was a difference evident between two new teachers who had graduated together from the same teacher preparation program, and who had appeared to adopt a constructivist, student-centered approach to teaching during their pre-service experiences?

## **Findings**

Three themes emerged in this study: variations in the degree of freedom the participants felt they had to make curricular decisions, the impetus for (and focus of) their reflections, and how they thought about their role as English teachers. Each of these themes was represented differently by Elizabeth and Terry, and it was the synthesis of these contrarieties that led us to realize that school leaders and organizational behavior influenced the way the participants thought about teaching over the course of their first year. What follows is an account of the differences found in each theme.

### **Degrees of Freedom in Curriculum Decision Making**

The extent to which Elizabeth and Terry had freedom in choosing what they did in terms of how materials were chosen, instruction was delivered, and student learning was assessed varied from what was perceived as being a high level of autonomy in their individual decision-making to being highly controlled by the school/district. While Elizabeth was part of the Language Arts team's curriculum decision-making process, overall, she felt that she had little autonomy in determining how the curriculum played out in her classroom. This was evidenced, in part, by tensions that often arose around meeting the needs of the district and meeting the needs of the students. Elizabeth explained:

I'm concerned about the pace. I wonder if we're flying through so much material. For them trying to read *The Odyssey* was nearly impossible. Students would say "I just read it and I have no idea what that says." The problem is that these students didn't start out with the Common Core and so we're asking kids to jump several grade levels and mine are already behind so you know that's why I end up in the middle trying to be the one who makes sense of it and who turns around and translates it for them.

The school district had created a pacing guide that not only described what concepts should be covered and when, but also stipulated materials to be used during instruction (e.g., *The Odessey*). Elizabeth interpreted the pacing guide as a mandate that could not be strayed from or ignored, and as a result, it influenced the way she chose to teach. Continuing, she explained:

You're walking around [the classroom] trying to get them to read something they can't understand in little pieces at a time. You're explaining a lot of it to them, which puts it all back on the teacher. It forces a little bit of a shift back to a traditional teaching style where you're just giving them all the answers.

By January, her sense of urgency to cover previously laid-out material that would appear on a district quarterly assessment led Elizabeth to claim, "...if it's not going to be on the quarterly assessment, then I don't care about it." Contrast this with a statement Elizabeth made during the initial interview in August:

So I'm just hoping I can sort of juggle it all and keep what's most important the focus, which is getting the students what they need and seeing them grow and seeing them learn. I'm excited to come up with new ideas of how to do things and try new things.

We see, from the beginning of the year to mid-year, a shift in Elizabeth's focus on what gets taught and how things are taught in her classroom. We would argue that this shift from a student-centered to a curriculum-centered approach was due to the lack of agency or autonomy that Elizabeth felt in the decision-making process.

Terry, on the other hand, regarded himself as having considerable agency at Brownsville Middle School when it came to curriculum decisions. He explained:

I have a lot of support, but at the same time, I don't feel like I'm being [prescribed] or forced about what I have to teach or how I need to teach. I feel like I have a lot of room to do kind of what I want or what I think is best for the students.

Our monthly observations revealed Terry's continuing use of student-centered, constructivist approaches with his students. Even during the weeks leading up to the spring test, when teachers at Brownsville were encouraged to concentrate on test preparation, Terry believed he had the freedom to determine how much test preparation he would actually do. What follows are field notes taken during a conversation after an observation conducted in March just before the administration of the annual standardized assessment:

Terry explained that test preparation had begun the previous Monday when the students returned from Spring Break. Asked to talk about his experiences with it, he suggested that he'd been struggling with a tension of sorts. On one hand, he felt guilty about devoting so much time to an activity that he didn't think was fostering any learning, that disengaged his students, and that he found "boring" as a teacher. Terry went on to explain that, while he believed the reading and writing activities he'd asked students to participate in throughout the year had adequately prepared his students, there remained a part of him that felt like he ought to devote time to test prep just in case.

I indicated that, in spite of the pressure Terry felt to devote class time to test preparation, he nonetheless devotes the first 15 minutes of class to independent reading, time that could have been spent working on the open response writing assignment that followed. Asked to justify his decision to do so, he explained that the decision was motivated by the fact that he wasn't comfortable devoting an entire period to test preparation without the students learning anything.

Tyler not only felt that he had sufficient agency to decide what he needed to do in class, he actually acted upon that agency to determine what his students needed to learn and how to go about teaching them to meet that end.

## **Focus of Reflection**

There was also a difference in terms of how Elizabeth and Terry reflected on their work. In Elizabeth's case, reflection revolved around meeting the demands of the administration and other teachers. Elizabeth attached importance to the assessments which was relative to the expectations of the administration and her fellow teachers. Elizabeth explained:

If you think about everything else that we do in this room on a day-to-day basis, all the things that I assess and put in the grade book, none of it is going to speak louder than the papers [students] write at the end of each quarter. Everything else is going to seem like stuff we did to get to the papers. If the principal is looking to evaluate you, or the district is looking to evaluate you, in my opinion that's what they're going to look at.

In general, Elizabeth seemed to spend much of her time in our conversations reflecting about assessments and how her students' performance would reflect on her. When asked about this seeming obsession with the quarterly assessments, Elizabeth agreed that it had taken over her thinking about teaching and learning. She offered that, compared to her internship experience the year before, the implementation of the Common Core State Standards had resulted in a rigid approach to teaching and learning. She explained, "I mean so much of what I saw even when I was interning last year ... none of it was this regimented." It was apparent that Elizabeth spent much of her time thinking about the demands placed upon her regarding instructional pacing and assessment with the concern centered on how she might be perceived as an ineffective teacher if her students did not perform well on the quarterly assessments.

For Terry, student learning needs, and the extent to which he met them were at the forefront of his reflective thinking. During one of our conversations, we asked Terry what he was thinking about while he watched his students participate in a Socratic Circle activity. He responded:

As I was observing I was really kind of watching the students individually and comparing them in my mind to the past two times we've had a Socratic Circle and trying to look for where they were digging into the text and thinking deeply about things and where they were just kind of skimming over things or not digging deeply. So I was trying to analyze their discussion and look at what we needed to work on.

Terry did not appear to be captivated by the fear of failing as a teacher, as Elizabeth seemed to be. Instead, Terry explained that while there were occasions when he felt his lessons had gone wrong, or when he failed to manage his classroom, those experiences presented him with learning experiences, the result of which led him to improve his teaching.

## **Role Conceptualization**

Finally, there was a difference in how the participants conceptualized their role as teachers. Elizabeth regarded herself as a manager of student learning – a result having to keep pace with other English classes and prepare students for quarterly district assessments. Elizabeth also saw herself as filling the role of a rule follower, and she explained that, in her mind, the administration valued teachers “who work very hard. Who, I don’t want this to sound bad or negative – who follow the rules.” When asked why it was important to be a “rule follower,” Elizabeth explained that the Heights Junior High faculty had received very firm directives from the administration regarding the administration of the quarterly assessment. Elizabeth did not want to be perceived as doing anything that was not sanctioned by the administration at either the school or district levels.

Elizabeth’s concern over fitting in and being a team player predominated and it led her to comply with curricular decisions that she recognized were not always in the students’ best interest. Throughout the study, Elizabeth lamented that she was not able to meet the needs of her students through the student-centered teaching approach that she had experimented with in her teacher preparation program. At one point she reflected:

I feel like I never have time to do the things that I know are important because I either learned them in the [teacher education program] or they were the things that I admired most about my mentor teachers, like trying to help develop a love for reading.

This self-assessment was consistent with our observations throughout the year. What appeared to be at the center of her teaching energy was keeping up with the pacing guide and addressing only what was assessed.

Terry viewed himself as a facilitator of learning, and he administered formative and summative assessments to diagnose where he needed to supplement and change his instruction to meet students’ needs. He continued to experiment with progressive teaching practices he encountered in his teacher education courses and he used this approach to support his students’ learning that went beyond what was measured on mandated tests. For example, he explained one lesson that we observed related to students reading about the experiences of Holocaust victims as they were being transported to the concentration camps by train:

So I wanted to do something today that got their attention, and helped them to empathize a little bit and understand what these people [Holocaust victims] were going through, and like Paige [student] said at the end – to kind of understand what they’re feeling and put yourself through that instead of just thinking they were people you know, [who] went through this. So that was my goal – to really get them into it so they would understand the emotions that these people were going through when they [the students] started reading the play.

We asked Terry if empathy was a concept outlined in the new Common Core State Standards and he confirmed that it was not. When pressed to explain why he chose to devote his time to teaching it, he responded:

I think it's something that they have to be able to do... just on a human level. Even ignoring all the English/Language Arts stuff, on a human level they have to be able to empathize with what other people are facing around the world or in history in order not to repeat that. Going back to the Holocaust, that was probably one of the biggest problems – people didn't empathize with the Jewish people and understand what they were going through.

Here, Terry moved away from the mandated CCSS curriculum to teach something that he felt his students needed and could benefit from as they developed into mature human beings. We see this as an example of the agency Terry feels in having the power to make decisions about what his students learn and how they are taught.

### **Discussion of Initial Findings**

Heights Junior High School and Brownsville Middle School represent two distinct contexts that contributed to Elizabeth and Terry's construction of what it means to be a teacher. The norms and values of each school system played a role in shaping our participants' understanding. Somewhat unanticipated was the seemingly dramatically different experiences of Elizabeth and Terry; however, we are reminded that research on pre-service teachers (Smagorinsky, Rhym, & Moore, 2013) and first-year teachers (Bickmore, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2005) indicates that there can be conflicting paradigms represented by preparation programs on the one hand and the schools on the other. Our research questions led us to ask what was behind the differences between Elizabeth's and Terry's experiences.

The difference between Elizabeth and Terry's experiences can be explained as two different contexts where, consistent with organizational threat rigidity (Staw, et al., 1981), Elizabeth's school system responded to external accountability mandates by making a marked effort to control the curricular materials teachers used, the pace at which they taught, and how they assessed student learning. In doing so, the system valued a uniform implementation of the CCSS and placed the standards movement at the center of the school's instructional concerns.

In contrast, teachers at Brownsville Middle School were afforded more autonomy to make curricular and assessment decisions. In the latter context, the CCSS were considered important, but teachers constructed them as guiding principles that informed, rather than dictated, the curricular decisions they made.

Our conceptual framework focused on the characteristics of instructional leadership and threat rigidity. Using these two constructs, Table 3 presents how each of the schools might be represented. Heights Junior High School emulated a school that was being instructionally led by a more restrictive instructional leadership style and was rigidly responding to the implementation of the CCSS. Brownsville Middle School, on the other hand, showed traits of instructional leadership as defined by the preponderant

literature (Blase & Blase, 1999; Hoy & Hoy, 2003; Nelson & Sassi, 2005; Southworth, 2002).

The leadership of Heights Junior High School and the leadership from the district, as experienced by Elizabeth, appeared to be rigid in nature and seemed to align with conceptualization of instructional leadership emulating a top-down managerial approach.

Table 3

*Instructional Leadership and Threat Rigidity Matrix*

	Heights Junior High	Brownsville Middle
<b>Instructional Leadership</b>		
Continuing development of best practices and strategies		X
Controlling curriculum and instruction	X	
Culture building		X
Promoting quality instruction		X
Narrow mission	X	
Nurturing two-way communication		X
Teacher flexibility (autonomy)		X
Top-down directive approach	X	
<b>Threat Rigidity</b>		
Centralized influence	X	
Constricted communication	X	
Increase of administrative control	X	
No risk taking	X	
Pressure to conform	X	
Valuation of teacher conformity	X	

### **Heights Junior High, Threat Rigidity, and Instructional Leadership**

The leadership of Heights Junior High School and the leadership from the district as experienced by Elizabeth appeared to be rigid in nature and seemed to align with conceptualization of instructional leadership emulating a top-down managerial approach. While Elizabeth had the utmost respect for her principal, and described the administration at Heights Junior High School as: "...wonderful. They are very good at handling the kids. We don't have a lot of discipline problems...it's never out of control;" she also expressed

concern that they rarely came to observe her teach. During our conversation in March, Elizabeth offered:

...in the last couple of weeks, a few different times the principal has congratulated me on what a great job I'm doing. And realistically, my first question was, "How did you know? How do you know that I'm doing a great job?" And I say that only because in the whole year there have been only two visits, one by the principal, one by the assistant principal, and one time when there was a committee of five people.... I hope I'm meeting her [the principal's] expectations, she seems like I am. I don't know. But my question is: why aren't they in here more?

When asked about any feedback that she had received as a result of those three visits, Elizabeth explained that they look for specific things such as level of student engagement and “transitioning every 7 to 12 minutes.”

They walk through, they get a glimpse, they tell you what their glimpse was and sort of what they saw you doing. Hopefully we're trying to plan lessons that will fit into that, because we know they are going to be looking for those things.... I don't know if that helps me as a teacher.

From Elizabeth’s account, school administrators were exhibiting management behaviors predominantly over instructional leadership behaviors. With the demand from central office to follow a uniform pacing guide regardless of the needs of the individual student reflected a top-down managerial approach that was controlling the curriculum through prescribed teaching materials and assessments. We considered this to be a link to threat rigidity as the organization was responding to the mandated implementation of the CCSS. On the other hand, according to Elizabeth, there was no evidence of meaningful conversations over instructional issues between the school administration and Elizabeth.

In one conversation, Elizabeth spoke of the term “anti-Common Core” being used by the administration and other teachers as a label for those teachers who have spoken out about how the implementation of the CCSS might be different. Controlling what teachers said and did in relation to the implementation of the CCSS was confirmed by an email from the principal to the teaching staff stating that any complaining or adverse comments to what was occurring in the school would not be tolerated. The constriction of communication reinforced organizational behavior that was consistent with the threat rigidity found in schools by Olsen and Sexton (2009) and Daly (2009). This valuation of conformity was important to Elizabeth as she identified herself as being a “rule follower” or “team player,” and felt that for this reason, she was highly valued by her principal. The fact that Elizabeth had abandoned any student-centered constructivist pedagogy for a more traditional teacher-centered approach in order to be a rule follower or team player did not seem to be an issue for the administration.

## **Brownsville Middle, Threat Rigidity, and Instructional Leadership**

Terry's experience at Brownsville Middle School contrasted with Elizabeth's experience at Heights Junior High School. Terry shared:

...one of the things that struck me when I first interviewed here ... a lot of the interview questions were about the Common Core and [we] were discussing the CCSS, but it didn't seem like it was a cloud hanging over me or like that it was going to be expected that I rigidly adhere to those standards. I do feel like there is a lot of autonomy for teachers and there's a lot of room to choose what I think is best for my students without feeling like I have to rigidly adhere to a set of standards or a set of expectations by the school district.

Later in the year, Tyler noted that the CCSS invited teachers to address the kinds of things he thought good teachers were already addressing. There was no evidence that Terry was being directed to teach in a certain way or to assess his students in a prescribed fashion. He explained:

I have a lot of support, but at the same time I don't feel like I'm being forced about what I have to teach or how I need to teach. I feel like I have a lot of room to do what I want or what I think is best for the students. Being a teacher at Brownsville Middle School, it feels like I have a lot of freedom. It feels that no matter what I do, I have the support of my administration. It feels like I have room to experiment and do what I want as a teacher. I don't feel pressured to follow a certain curriculum map or to have prescribed lessons or anything like that.

The freedom Terry felt serves as a meaningful contrast to Elizabeth's experience at Heights Junior High School. Brownsville had a culture that supported risk-taking and honored the professionalism of teachers.

Terry mentioned that his principal had frequently been in his classroom. During these visits, the principal not only observed what Terry was doing, but also talked with students to determine if they understood what was happening with the day's instruction. Terry reported that the principal constantly told him, "We're glad you are here. Let me know how I can support you." Terry interpreted this type of feedback as affirmation that exercising his freedom as a professional teacher was not only valued, but using progressive pedagogical strategies such as Socratic Circles and assimilations were recognized as good teaching.

Terry felt that he had a voice regarding instructional matters at Brownsville. He cited several instances where he had the opportunity to share what he was doing in his classroom with during faculty meetings and in turn was able to learn from the experiences shared by his fellow teachers. While there was never a situation where Terry felt a conflict with what the administration presented in terms of instruction, he felt confident that he would be able to debate any issues without retribution. In other words, Terry was describing what we interpreted as being the antithesis of a rigid response

where there is a constriction of communication and a lack of innovativeness or risk-taking (Staw et al., 1981; Olsen & Sexton, 2009).

## Discussion

Emergent theories raise two questions concerning causality: 1) Does the rigid response of an organization lead to more of an instructional management practice by school leaders (see Figure 2), or 2) Does the nature of leadership approach cause a rigid response (see Figure 3)? One theory might explain the nature of leadership practice is dependent on the degree of rigid response to external mandates on the organization. It could be possible that at Heights Junior High School (represented by the left hand side of Figure 2), the rigid response of the school system to the implementation of the CCSS caused the principal to act more as an instructional manager or “puppeteer” pulling the strings in such a way that Heights Junior High School teachers (i.e., Elizabeth) were serving as a puppets – following rules and feeling constricted in their approach to teaching.

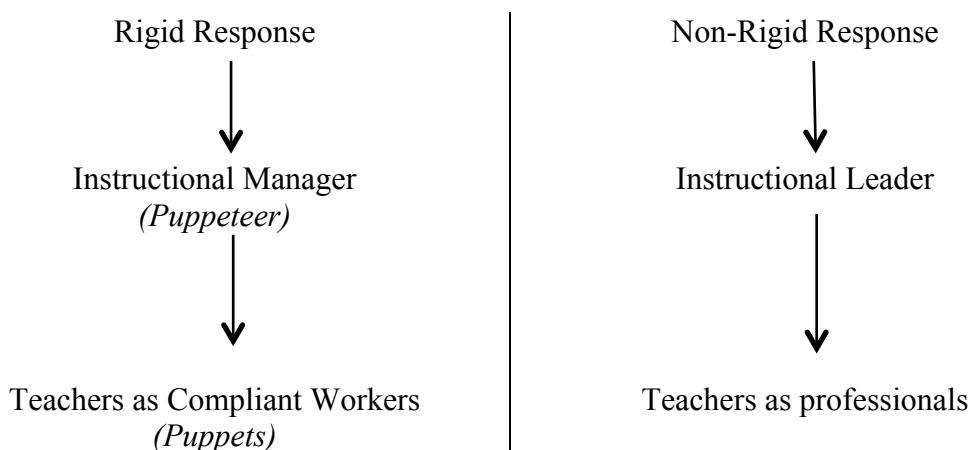
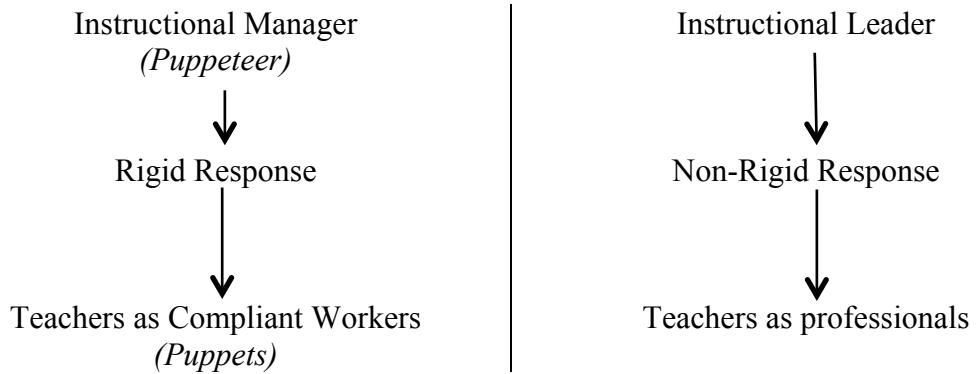


Figure 2. The difference between the influence of rigid response and non-rigid response on leadership styles and teacher outcomes.



*Figure 3.* The difference between the influence of leadership typologies on degrees of rigid-response and teacher outcomes.

On the right side of Table 2, a possible representation of what might be happening at Brownsville Middle School shows that the seemingly non-rigid response of the system allowed for instructional leadership to exist allowing teachers (i.e., Terry) the opportunity to make decisions, try new strategies and in general practice as professional educators. The second emerging theoretical question suggests a different causal theory (Figure 3). Perhaps it is the leadership typology that influences the organization's response to an external mandate.

What we were not able to discern from our data was the relationship between the degree of rigid response and leadership practices at Heights Junior High School and Brownsville Middle School. However, we do see a causal relationship possibly existing between rigid response and leadership behavior. Framing this relationship through process theory as an explanation of organizational behavior presented originally by Mohr (1982) we propose an explanation that allows for the analysis “of the causal *processes* by which some events influence others” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 36). What we do know is that there were two very different responses to the implementation of the CCSS. Heights Junior High School exhibited a rigid response and Brownsville Middle School exhibited a non-rigid response.

Admittedly, we acknowledge that a limitation in this study does not allow us to examine the thought processes of school leaders. The confirmation of either of the two theories presented Figure 2 and Figure 3 would require talking with those who lead schools and school systems – which is a focus for further planned study; however, we do feel that the experiences of teachers captured through conversations and observations over time do afford us the opportunity to realize what was occurring in each case.

There are obvious limitations to examining just two cases. The context of each participant and each school site are unique unto themselves. For this reason, we are not suggesting a generalizability of these findings; however, this study does allow for us to consider the possible ramifications that the response of an organization produces when confronted by an external mandate.

### **Significance of the Study**

The two cases examined in this study direct attention to the way that school leaders respond to external mandates in the accountability era. The findings suggest that school leaders influence the way that beginning teachers think about, and approach, teaching. This study suggests the current accountability policy might very well be responsible for a rigid response in some schools that interferes with what we know as sound leadership and classroom practices. While the educational leadership field has stressed the importance of instructional leadership, this study suggests that adopting a rigid response to external mandates can produce instructional *managers* rather than instructional *leaders*. By adopting the role of puppeteer, and by positioning teachers as marionettes, instructional managers aim to enforce how the curriculum is taught, when it is taught, and how student learning is assessed. In doing so, they may establish a culture of surveillance (Authors, 2013). Such a response can lead beginning teachers to abandon what research suggests are effective teaching practices in order to comply with the demands of school leaders.

Additionally, the issue of professionalism comes into question. Teaching, as a profession, entails the knowledge, skills, and attributes involved in determining what students need to learn, how to get them to learn it, and how to assess their learning. Having the ability to create an environment conducive to learning where the individual student is at the forefront of being a professional educator. Much like a medical professional has the freedom to diagnose and treat patients, teaching professionals should be permitted to diagnose and solve the learning needs of their students. We see the rigid response that existed at Heights Junior High School as contributing to the de-professionalization of Elizabeth, who found it more important to “follow the rules” that had been established than to address the actual needs of her students. In a real sense, Elizabeth learned to value her ability to follow the rules imposed on her rather than the sense of agency of being a professional educator.

Although the concepts of instructional management and instructional leadership have been used interchangeably in the past, we argue that a difference between the two has evolved in the accountability era. We attribute this difference to the manner in which school leaders respond to external mandates. This, coupled with a push toward standardization at the national level, can decrease the likelihood that beginning teachers will embrace alternatives to the traditional instructional practices that predominate in many schools (Smagorinsky, et al., 2013).

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This study serves as a starting point in the examination of how schools respond to the neoliberal accountability policies that continue to influence the field of public education.

While we recognize that there are limitations to this study, the findings do suggest that further examination of the thought processes of instructional leaders as they implement externally driven mandates is warranted. Based on these two cases, several questions for the field of practice and future research emerge.

First, the relationship between instructional leadership and how teachers make sense of their roles should not be ignored. The cases of Elizabeth and Terry paint contrasting pictures of the influence of leadership on how two young teachers constructed meaning of being an educator. We argue that Elizabeth developed a sense of being a puppet that follows rules dictated by the puppeteer – the system leadership. During the same period of time, Terry developed a sense of professionalism in his role as a teacher with the leaders of Brownsville Middle School providing support through the nurturing of an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. This calls into question the purpose of sound leadership in a school setting – is it to promote professionalism among teachers or is it to promote compliance to a set way of doing things, where individual professional agency is eradicated?

Secondly, while this study does not take into account student achievement, it does raise the question as to how we define success as educational leaders. The center of attention for Elizabeth was assessment. How well her students performed on the quarterly assessments served as the measurement of her success. If something was not on the assessment, then she did not address it in her classroom instruction. This is much different than Terry's approach to student learning. Terry's concept of success was much broader and perhaps more difficult to measure; nonetheless, he felt it to be his professional obligation to give his students meaningful experiences that would allow them to develop attributes that are deemed important for success as adults. This calls into question the role of instructional leadership – are we satisfied as educational leaders to simply be content with learning how to play the accountability game and “win” by having the highest student achievement as measured by standardized tests?

Thirdly, one interesting aspect of the findings of this study is that Heights Junior High School had a history of performing at or above the expectations of the state in terms of student achievement. Brownsville, on the other hand did not. We concede that there very well may be other external factors that are unique to each school studied and that may be related to their past performance; however, typically, those systems that are identified as underperforming feel the greatest threat of facing sanctions; therefore, might be more prone to responding in a rigid manner to outside accountability mandates (Staw, et al., 1981). The opposite appears to be happening in this study and the question emerges as to why – have we reached a tipping point in how schools respond to external mandates? Are we entering an era where *all* schools perceive any new mandate that comes from the state or federal government may be prone to responding in a stifling rigid manner even though they might not be threatened with consequences as a result of failing performance?

Finally, there are possible implications regarding school system size and the tendency to respond in a rigid manner that might play a role in the quality of instructional leadership that exists. Elizabeth worked in a larger system than did Terry. Elizabeth's system had a more complex bureaucracy with 23 leadership positions in the central office – one of which carried the title of Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction and

others that were Directors of English Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science. In comparison, Terry's system had three leadership positions at the central office level. In this two-case study, the larger system responded to the implementation of the CCSS in a more rigid manner than did the smaller system. This suggests the question – is there a relation between system size and the type of control or response in relation to instructional matters and how does this difference either support or negate what is known about effective instructional leadership?

It is our hope that coming to the realization that threat rigidity as a response to external mandates might indeed influence the quality of instructional leadership and, thus, affect the way teachers go about their instructional practice will provide a framework for thinking about leading schools and preparing those who lead schools. Simply put, we feel that it is important to reflect on the questions: Are principal and other central office personnel indeed instructional leaders or are they puppets? Are teachers professional educators or are they merely compliant puppets?

## References

- Bengtson, E., & Connors, S.P. (2013, June). *Making sense of being a teacher in an age of educational accountability: Two case studies*. Paper presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Ethnographic & Qualitative Research Conference, Cedarville, University, Cedarville, OH.
- Bickmore, S.T., Smagorinsky, P., & O'Donnell-Allen, C. (2005). Tensions between traditions: The role of contexts in learning to teach. *English Education*, 38(1), 23-52.
- Blase, J., & Blase, J. (1999). Principals' instructional leadership and teacher development: Teachers' perspectives. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35(3), 349-378.
- Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2013). School Leaders Matter. *Education Next*, 13(1), 62-69.
- Daly, A.J. (2009). Rigid response in an age of accountability: The potential of leadership and trust. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 45(2), 168-216.
- Davies, D., & Dodd, J. (2002). Qualitative research and the question of rigor. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(2), 279-289.
- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformative leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329-351.
- Hallinger, P. (2005). Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4(1), 1-20.
- Hallinger, P., & Lee, M. (2013). Exploring the capacity to lead reform of teaching and learning quality in Thailand. *International Journal of Educational development*, 33(4), 305-315.
- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J.F. (2013). Running on empty? Finding the time and capacity to lead learning. *NASSP Bulletin*, 97(1), 5-21.
- Hoy, A.W., & Hoy, W.K. (2003). *Instructional leadership: A research-based guide to learning in schools* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kohl, H. (2009, January 8). The educational panopticon. *Teachers College Record*. Retrieved September 14, 2013, from <http://www.tcrecord.org>
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. The Wallace Foundation: New York. Retrieved from <http://www.sisd.net/cms/lib/TX01001452/Centricity/Domain/33/ReviewofResearch-LearningFromLeadership.pdf>
- Maxwell, J.A. (2012). *A realist approach for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, J.A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Milner, H.R. (2013). Scripted and narrowed curriculum reform in urban schools. *Urban Education*, 48(2), 163-70.
- Mohr, L.B. (1982). *Explaining organizational behavior*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Mombourquette, C. P., & Bedard, G. J. (2014). Principals' Perspectives on the Most Helpful District Leadership Practices in Supporting School-Based Leadership for Learning. *International Studies In Educational Administration* (Commonwealth Council For Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM)), 42(1), 61-73.
- Nelson, B.S., & Sassi, A. (2005). *The effective principal: Instructional leadership for high-quality learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Olsen, B., & Sexton, D. (2009). Threat rigidity, school reform, and how teachers view their work inside current education policy contexts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 9-44.
- Rigby, J.G. (2014). Three logics of instructional leadership. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 50(4), 610-644.
- Rothman, R. (2011). Five myths about the Common Core State Standards. *Harvard Education Letter*, 27(5). Retrieved from <http://hepg.org/hel/article/513>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Scott, W.R. (2002). *Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems* (5th ed). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Shatzer, R., Caldarella, P., Hallam, P., & Brown, B. (2014). Comparing the effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement: Implications for practice. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(4), 445-459.
- Shimizu, K. (2007). Prospect theory, behavioral theory, and the threat-rigidity thesis: Combinative effects on organizational decisions to divest formally acquired units. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 50(6), 1495-1514.
- Smagorinsky, P., Rhym, D., & Moore, C.P. (2013). Competing centers of gravity: A beginning English teacher's socialization process within conflictual settings. *English Education*, 45(2), 147-183.
- Southworth, G. (2002). Instructional leadership in schools: Reflections and empirical evidence. *School Leadership and Management*, 22(1), 73-91.
- Staw, B.M., Sanderland, L.E., & Dutton, J.E. (1981). Threat rigidity effects in organizational behavior: A multilevel analysis. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 26(4), 501-524.
- Tienken, C.H., & Zhao, Y. (2010). Common Core national curriculum standards: More questions...and answers. *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6(4), 3-13.