Fall 2005

The Process of Becoming a Blue Ribbon School: Perceptions of Participating Teachers And Principals

Dana Russina Harris

Georgia Southern University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/412

This dissertation (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.
THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL:
PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATING TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

by

DANA RUSSINA HARRIS

(Under the Direction of Michael D. Richardson)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze the shared experiences of teachers and principals within selected schools in their quest of achieving the United States Department of Education Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award in Georgia. In one sense, these schools were already successful. They were required to document five consecutive years of high or improving test scores as a prerequisite for consideration. Therefore, an attempt to better understand a process that could lead to continuous improvement and change in schools, as deemed necessary, was the fulcrum upon which this study rests. The researcher applied a theoretical framework to help explicate narratives drawn from participants. Principals were interviewed and collaborative school teams participated in focus groups. Research protocol questions guided the interviews to elicit responses relating to the seven research sub-questions to derive rich narratives. The qualitative data from the taped interviews were analyzed using the QSR NUD.IST 5 software program, which aided the researcher in categorizing the interviewees’ responses to the interview questions and, more importantly, identifying recurring themes, related ideas and responses pertinent to the purpose of the study. Narratives resulting from these procedures became the primary sources of data within this design.
Several conclusions emerged from this study. In all cases, the Blue Ribbon School process reduced isolation and strengthened teamwork, collegiality and school pride within the group of interviewees. These attributes were closely akin to discussions of school climate and culture and were reinforced through the retelling of stories. The process encouraged an integrated, holistic view of the school, particularly for team members who actively participated in preparing the application. Principals and school teams believed that by working together in a goal-oriented process such as the one found in the Blue Ribbon School program, they were able to glean a broader, more meaningful view of their school and agreed that a student focus was the driving force for the school’s aims and actions.

INDEX WORDS: Blue Ribbon Schools, Collaboration and shared vision, Learning communities, Principal leadership, Reflective practice, Organizational learning, School culture, Building leadership capacity, Professional growth and development, Instructional leadership, Stakeholder involvement
THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL:
PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATING TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

by

DANA RUSSINA HARRIS
B.S., Delaware State College, 1976
M.Ed., Augusta State University, 1992
Ed.S., South Carolina State University, 1997

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA
2005
THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL:
PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATING TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS
by
DANA RUSSINA HARRIS

Major Professor: Michael D. Richardson

Committee: Catherine C. Wooddy
James F. Burnham
Fred M. Page
Randal D. Carlson

Electronic Version Approved: December 2005
DEDICATION

With thankfulness to God for my loving family, I dedicate this dissertation, first of all, to my husband, Tony, for his patience, support and understanding during the writing of this dissertation. Thanks for being there throughout the process, encouraging me and giving me the added push when I needed it.

Secondly, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Millard, Sr. and Elizabeth Moody. Both of these very special people have always been my anchor and source of inspiration. Thanks for encouraging me every step of the way. Your positive influence, unconditional love and on-going support contributed greatly to the successful completion of this project.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Tanya, who is wise beyond her years. Thanks for your unfailing sense of humor, the encouraging nods and your constant belief in my abilities to get the job done.

I love you all very much.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the many individuals who have supported and encouraged me throughout this incredible journey. It was the unwavering contributions and moral support that motivated me to persevere in this monumental undertaking and ultimately led to the successful completion of this project.

First and foremost, are the members of my doctoral committee. I consider them all valued mentors and teachers who have guided me on this journey. I especially want to recognize the contributions of Dr. Catherine Wooddy, my major advisor. Dr. Wooddy provided a steady hand during this challenging project. Her unfaltering patience, perpetual encouragement and endless contributions throughout the process inspired me to persevere, as she gently guided me through each phase. I am eternally grateful for her wise counsel and friendship. What a great learning journey it has been with Dr. Wooddy as my guardian angel!

In addition, I would like to gratefully acknowledge and thank my dissertation methodologist, Dr. Michael Richardson. I have learned so much from him regarding the myriad of challenges facing educational leaders today. He was my very first professor in this doctoral program and quickly became a positive role model and mentor throughout this critical phase in my life. Thank you for ‘pushing’ in the right places and allowing me the venue for ‘pushing back.’ Your continued support and insights throughout this study were most appreciated.
I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. James Burnham, for serving on my committee. Your invaluable assistance and helpful advice during the proposal phase are deeply appreciated. Your support and many contributions were instrumental in making this study possible.

To my parents, Millard and Elizabeth Moody, goes my eternal gratitude for their constant love, support and encouragement that is expressed in so many ways. Thanks for teaching me to always reach for the stars and for the constant reminder that anything is possible, if you believe. I will always be eternally grateful to you for having confidence in me and for giving me the strength to keep on pushing. Mom and Dad, you are my inspiration and the light of my life. Thanks for believing in me.

To my daughter, Tanya Monique, who has grown up to be quite a special woman with all the qualities that would make any parent proud. Thanks for being my sounding board with your love, faith and support. Please know that you have indeed been the wind beneath my wings and the sunshine of my life.

Special thanks are extended to my husband and friend, Tony, whose emotional strength, patience, encouragement and deep trust in the power of love has made me realize how lucky I am. Thanks for reminding me, on a regular basis, that you understood that I needed to do this. I was constantly aware of your sacrifice and your belief in me as we marched together along this path. This milestone is shared with you as a symbol of our eternal partnership. May our journey together provide an even greater triumph.

Eternal gratitude is also extended to Josalyn Gregory, a very special and talented friend with many gifts. Thanks for spending countless hours reading over my paper,
giving me feedback, and supporting me in this journey to the very end. I would especially like to thank Rosalyn Wells, my technology specialist. Her impeccable talents, support and guidance enabled me to master the complex software skills necessary to complete this project.

I must also acknowledge my indebtedness to the principals and teachers of the seven Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools that participated in this study. I am appreciative beyond words. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to visit your professional homes to see first-hand what a significant difference you’re making in the lives of many.

Finally, to the many people who have “touched” my life and have made such a positive impact on me, thank you for your guidance, teaching, mentoring and caring. This is one of my many dreams that has finally come true!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 17

A. Introduction................................................................. 17

i) Blue Ribbon Schools-A Historical Backdrop of the Effective Schools Movement ........................................ 18
ii) Goals of the Blue Ribbon Program ................................. 21
iii) Criteria ........................................................................ 22
iv) Selection Process .......................................................... 25
v) Recognition Issues ......................................................... 26
vi) Impact ........................................................................ 26
vii) Professional Learning Organizations and Blue Ribbon Schools .......................................................... 27
viii) Principal Leadership .................................................... 30

B. Statement of the Problem .................................................. 32
C. Research Questions ........................................................ 33
D. Importance of the Study ................................................... 35
E. Procedures ....................................................................... 39
F. Assumptions .................................................................... 41
G. Limitations ....................................................................... 42
H. Delimitations .................................................................... 43
I. Definition of Terms .......................................................... 43
J. Summary .......................................................................... 47
2. REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE ...... 48
   A. Introduction .............................................................................. 48
      i. The Blue Ribbon Schools Movement .................................. 48
      ii. Organizational Culture ......................................................... 50
      iii. Learning Communities ....................................................... 54
      iv. Understanding the Dynamics of Change ............................ 59
      v. Education and Communication ............................................ 62
      vi. Principal Leadership ........................................................... 63
      vii. Building Leadership Capacity .......................................... 69
      viii. Professional Growth Opportunities ................................. 75
      ix. Reflective Practice .............................................................. 79
      x. Collaboration ......................................................................... 80
     xi. Shared Values and Vision in Learning Communities .......... 84
   B. Summary ................................................................................... 85
3. METHODOLOGY .............................................................................. 93
   A. Introduction............................................................................. 93
   B. Research Questions .................................................................... 93
   C. Participants .............................................................................. 94
   D. Research Design and Procedures ............................................ 95
   E. Instrumentation ......................................................................... 97
   F. Data Analysis ........................................................................... 99
   G. Summary .................................................................................. 100
4. REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS ................................. 102
   A. Introduction............................................................................. 103
   B. Research Questions.................................................................. 103
   C. Research Design....................................................................... 104
   D. Respondents ............................................................................. 105
   E. Elementary School Demographics ........................................... 109
   F. Qualitative Data Analysis ......................................................... 111
      i) Motivating Factors ............................................................... 113
         a. Continuous Learning Opportunities ............................... 113
         b. Recognition and Accomplishment .................................. 115
         c. No Child Left Behind Legislation ..................................... 117
ii) Critical Role .......................................................... 118
   a. Reflective Practitioner ...................................... 118
   b. Active Learner .............................................. 120

iii) Impact ............................................................... 122
   a. Self Renewal and Discovery............................. 123
   b. Participatory Leadership ................................ 125

iv) Collaboration and Shared Values ....................... 126
   a. Shared Accountability ..................................... 126
   b. Unity of Purpose .......................................... 127

v) Professional Growth and Development ............... 128
   a. Improved Practice .......................................... 128
   b. Organizational Learning ................................ 130

vi) Principal Leadership ......................................... 131
   a. Visionary ..................................................... 131
   b. Mentor ....................................................... 133
   c. Instructional Leader ..................................... 134

vii) Stakeholder Involvement ................................. 135
   a. Partners in Education ..................................... 135
   b. Achievement of Mutual Goals ......................... 136

G. Summary ............................................................. 137

5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS .......... 139

A. Summary ............................................................. 139
B. Discussion of Research Findings ......................... 141
   Sub research question 1 Discussion ...................... 142
   i) Sub research question 2 Discussion ................... 145
   ii) Sub research question 3 Discussion ................. 148
   iii) Sub research question 4 Discussion ............... 150
   iv) Sub research question 5 Discussion ................. 151
   v) Sub research question 6 Discussion ................. 154
   vi) Sub research question 7 Discussion ............... 157
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vii)</td>
<td>Overarching Question</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>Analysis of Research Findings</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>Dissemination</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td></td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>IRB Approval Correspondence</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>Cover Letter to Superintendents, Principals and Participants</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>Superintendent and Principal Response Form</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>Demographic Survey</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Informed Consent Agreement</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>In-depth Interview Guide</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Studies Related to Organizational Culture .........................................87
Table 2: Studies Related to Learning Communities .........................................88
Table 3: Studies Related to Reflective Practice .................................................89
Table 4: Studies Related to Principal Leadership .............................................90
Table 5: Studies Related to Collaboration ........................................................91
Table 6: Studies Related to Professional Growth and Development .............92
Table 7: Qualitative Item Analysis .................................................................98
Table 8: Demographic Characteristics of Principals at Selected Blue Ribbon Schools (N=7) .................................................................................................105
Table 9: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School A (N=5) ......................................................................................................106
Table 10: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School B (N=6) ......................................................................................................106
Table 11: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School C (N=6) ......................................................................................................107
Table 12: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School D (N=5) ......................................................................................................107
Table 13: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School E (N=5) ......................................................................................................108
Table 14: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School F (N=5) ......................................................................................................108
Table 15: Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School G (N=5)

Table 16: Demographics of Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools in Georgia (N=7)
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework .................................................................35
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The United States Department of Education established the Blue Ribbon Schools Program in 1982, to acknowledge exemplary public and private learning institutions modeling both excellence and equity in schools. Its initial design was a progressive strategy designed to facilitate school improvement and change. Engaging in a collaborative and stimulating process, local school communities were to demonstrate a strong commitment to the pursuit of educational excellence for all students (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). The Blue Ribbon Schools Program, considered to be on the cutting edge of education reform, identified and offered recognition to a diverse group of public and private schools that were unusually effective in meeting local, state, and national goals and in educating all of their students (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). Since its inception, the U. S. Department of Education has honored many of America’s most successful schools with their designation.

The major premise of the Blue Ribbon Schools Program was to effect improvement through the collaborative self-evaluation required of local school communities, hence, encouraging schools to search both within and among themselves to share information about best practices based on a common understanding of standards which demonstrate educational success (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). With the emergence of this national school improvement initiative and other major reform efforts of the 1980s, enrichment of the school environment have received increasingly more attention (Starratt, 1996).
School improvement remains a leading national issue. The founding of the Blue Ribbon Schools Program was, in part, a response to the anticipated publication of the landmark study, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and the controversy that surrounded it. This report indicated that American students had experienced a substantial decline in educational performance in former decades (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Consequently, support for basic restructuring, guidelines for curriculum development, strategies for instruction and assessment, technological advancement, and a variety of other innovations were implemented to improve the structures that currently exist in schools (King & Newman, 2001).

It had become well established that reforming schools required both restructuring and reculturing, during which the role of principals needed to be reshaped, teacher leaders developed, and professional learning communities created to reflect on areas of promising improvement for the future (Sarason, 1996; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Miller, 1998; Fullan, 1999; Murphy & Louis, 1999). Moreover, as pressures to transform American schools continued to build, those who worked with and in schools soon discovered the richness of school improvement efforts as a hopeful means of seeking new and revolutionary approaches to better meet the expanding needs of students (Else, 2000).

*Blue Ribbon Schools - A Historical Backdrop of the Effective Schools Movement.*

The 1970s spawned the effective schools movement, a movement that flourished in the 1980s primarily through the research and writing of Ron Edmonds, Wilbur Brookover, and Larry Lezotte. These researchers identified schools in which students from predominantly minority populations were offered an effective academic program
that demonstrated extremely high attainment on standardized tests (Stringfield & Tedlie, 1993). From an examination of the overall characteristics offered in these schools, a report by the U. S. Department of Education (1986) validated Edmond’s findings on the characteristics of effective schools. The summary list on the report included:

1) Vigorous instructional leadership.

2) A school climate that operated under the assumption that all students would achieve.

3) An atmosphere that was orderly and quiet, but not rigid so that learning could occur.

4) Student learning should be the primary purpose of schooling.

5) A frequent and purposeful program of monitoring student progress toward the educational objectives (U. S. Department of Education, 1986).

Based on these correlations, an effective schools was defined as “one wherein there was essentially no relationship between family background and achievement, but where its characteristics and outcomes demonstrated effectiveness” (Stringfield & Tedlie 1993, p. 17). Subsequent studies, often referred to as effective schools research, had as their primary purpose to identify the critical factors in education that promoted academic achievement (Morley & Rassool, 1999). Many of the effective schools research studies examined inner city elementary schools that were identified as having predominantly low socioeconomic status populations (Cawelti, 1999).

According to Cawelti (1999), the bases for assessment of these schools were generally student achievement scores on standardized tests in reading and/or math. Effective schools were often those whose mean achievement placed them at or above
grade level when compared to national norms and whose actual mean achievement scores were well above scores predicted for them from non-school factors. After the high performing schools were identified, researchers assessed the characteristics of these schools using surveys and case studies to determine the reasons for the schools’ effectiveness. The characteristics were studied, analyzed, and shared with researchers and educators nationally in anticipation of improving student achievement in other school districts (Cawelti, 1999).

Researchers today continue to conduct large-scale studies of schools across the country that have been effective in educating large populations of children. Some of the recent studies have looked exclusively at schools with high levels of students in poverty and have attempted to discover the reasons for their successes (Cawelti, 1999). While there was no consensus on just what the salient characteristics of a successful school were, there was some consistency and considerable overlap in the results of these studies. The major premise was based upon how schools could change to meet the needs of society and individuals, as well as to prepare students for global understanding (Saban, 1997).

Ogden and Gerninario (1995) supported the mission of the Blue Ribbon Schools Program. They asserted that the factors associated with effective schools are clearly those characteristics of Blue Ribbon professional, collegial, student-outcome based schools. These schools have the intrinsic ability and habits of mind to continually engage in renewal. They have the “organizational vitality to self-assess, to set and revise student centered objectives to plan, to act in unity, and to reassess” (p. 8-9).
The Blue Ribbon Schools Program, now publicizing its use as a self-assessment vehicle, has become a powerful stimulus for schools interested in bringing a sense of pride, confidence, and focus for self-renewal and change (Marzke, Fester, & Mullens, 1997). All schools will find that the Blue Ribbon criteria can be useful for ongoing school improvement efforts, even if recognition is not the immediate goal” (U. S. Department of Education, 2001, p. ii). The U. S. Department of Education consequently holds the position that the act of self-assessment promotes a climate of continuous reflection and professional growth for all stakeholders, thus creating the best educational environment for all students (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). The processes involved in applying for the Blue Ribbon award, win or lose, are the program's greatest strength as a major reform initiative. This fact, coupled with the knowledge that the Blue Ribbon Schools Program is still considered to be a major national reform initiative, has provided a major impetus for this study.

Goals of the Blue Ribbon Program

Blue Ribbon Schools were intended to serve as approved models of excellence and equity, providing examples of successful school improvement efforts to be used by other local communities (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Furthermore, Blue Ribbon stakeholders were encouraged to engage in continuous self-assessment and school improvement by applying for the award again after recognition has been given. The goals of the Blue Ribbon Schools Program are presented as follows:

1) To identify and give public recognition to outstanding public and private schools throughout the United States that achieved high academic standards or have shown significant academic improvement over five years;
2) To make available a comprehensive framework of key criteria for school effectiveness that can serve as a basis for participatory self-assessment and planning in schools; and

3) To facilitate communication and sharing of best practices within and among schools based on a common framework of criteria related to success (U. S. Department of Education, 2001, p. ii).

Criteria

Program guidelines require that schools competing for the Blue Ribbon provide evidence of a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students. The Blue Ribbon Schools Program maintains that the criteria be comprehensive, interrelated, and non-prescriptive (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). Results are assessed in terms of how they meet each individual school's needs rather than the specific means or procedures used to achieve them. The program makes further assertions that the criteria serves as a basis for collaborative self-assessment and that self-assessment provides an effective school improvement strategy (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). “School responses to the overall framework should provide a profile of school strengths and areas of improvement. The criteria are a useful tool for self-assessment, reflection, strategic planning, and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in a common project” (U. S. Department of Education, 2000, p. iii). Selection is based upon how well schools meet recognition criteria in the following areas:

1) Student focus and support

2) School organization and culture

3) Challenging standards and curriculum
4) Active teaching and learning

5) Professional community

6) Leadership and education vitality

7) School, family, and community partnerships


In order to meet the demands of the section entitled, “Objective Indicators of Academic Success,” schools must produce documentation for five years of continuous, positive data. The indicators of success are classified as: (a) student performance on measures of achievement, (b) daily student and teacher attendance rates, (c) students’ post graduation pursuits, and (d) school staff and student awards. These data must reveal either a high level of accomplishment or a consistent pattern of improvement. Schools that fail to meet the above criteria during the period of time preceding submission of the Blue Ribbon Schools’ applications are immediately removed from consideration. Thus, appropriate indicators of success serve as prerequisites for schools that wish to apply (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

At present, the application requires succinct, narrative responses to more than 40 questions developed by the Blue Ribbon Schools Program. The first few pages in the application describe the purpose of the program and offer a brief overview of the perspective offered by the recognition criteria. According to the United States Department of Education (2000), “...the criteria are broad enough to suit diverse school contexts and to accommodate new or changing goals and strategies within any particular school” (p. iii.). The United States Department of Education further states that the narrative responses required by the nomination packet are designed to elicit commentary
directly related to the eight categories of selection criteria and how they apply to a particular school. Marzke, Fiester, and Mullens (1997) explained that the Blue Ribbon Schools Program “… also provides a concise description of the eight categories as a tool for self-assessment” (p. 11).

Each year, special emphasis areas are pointed out where national school performance should be considered and where more effective models are sought to demonstrate best practices to others. The decision to apply for special recognition is optional and the review and selection process in these areas is separate. Questions pertaining to the special recognition appear in a specific section and are submitted with the rest of the application. During the two years, 2000-01 and 2001-02, special education and technology were designated focus areas. Of all the special emphasis areas in recent years, the Blue Ribbon Schools Program has most frequently named technology. Schools may not receive the optional special recognition without first achieving Blue Ribbon status (United States Department of Education, 2001).

While all schools are encouraged to improve and to apply for Blue Ribbon status, some schools or school districts found to be out of compliance with the Federal Office of Civil Rights guidelines, are disqualified. In order to be considered, schools must model the American idea of educational opportunity. Each school’s success in promoting the intellectual, social, moral, and physical growth of all students, including students with disabilities and with limited English proficiency, is scrutinized because this inclusiveness represents an essential part of the recognition criteria (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). The developers of the recognition criteria, therefore, claim that the Blue Ribbon Schools Program promotes equality for all students. By identifying successful schools,
the program seeks to give recognition to schools that have demonstrated these values, as well as those schools that made significant improvement by overcoming environmental obstacles (U. S. Department of Education, 2001).

Selection Process

The selection of a school for recognition is largely determined by an evaluation of how well it has engaged in self-definition. Thus, the parameters of a school’s success are measured by how well it has done in meeting its own goals and how effectively it has served students, their families, and the local community. In order to be judged worthy of national recognition, schools are also required to demonstrate progress in achieving state and national education goals.

Blue Ribbon Schools are expected to offer instructional programs that meet high academic standards, to provide evidence of a learning-centered school environment, and to document long term student assessment results that are above the average of other similar schools. Only 728 schools were selected for recognition within the last three years. Less than 5% of schools nationwide received the award, making it much coveted due to its selectiveness and reliance on broad-based criteria (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

Elementary schools may now apply for recognition along with secondary schools. However, elementary and secondary schools are selected in alternate annual cycles. At the time elementary schools were added, it was considered better not to compare them with schools with slightly different emphasis, and the decision was made to give the awards in alternate years. The thrust of the program remains the same (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).
According to the United States Department of Education (1997), the nomination packet provides a comprehensive framework of research-based criteria that schools could use to assess themselves and plan changes. This framework, therefore, is considered to be an excellent opportunity to involve all relevant stakeholders in a common school improvement project. They add, “Recognition is a powerful energizer for recognized schools to make further improvement, and stimulates other schools to continue their efforts to strive for national recognition” (U. S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 5).

Recognition Issues

The practice of singling out schools for special recognition is not without critics. A substantial number of individuals from the educational arena warn that jealousy and ruthless competition could be the only lasting end result (Richard, 2000). Wynne (1988) issued a caveat indicating that recognition programs must remain focused on the greater goal of encouraging educators to improve schools from within. He advised, “Recognition programs should not mainly aim to dole out practice, resources, and encouragement to deserving schools, virtuous though they may be; instead the objective is to foster change for the better” (p. 11). In order to counter these and other criticisms, the program added an emphasis on self-assessment when it was revised in 1996 and later conducted field tests during the 1997-1998 academic school year. Proponents of the Blue Ribbon Schools Program currently maintain that school improvement, as a process, is the primary benefit of applying for the award and that, win or lose, the process is the program’s greatest strength (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

Richard (2000) underscored the recognition program debate by citing the comments of educators and Blue Ribbon Program officials who stated that, “at its best the award
process could be a valuable tool to help a school examine itself, then find ways to battle its weaknesses” (p. 16). At its worst, the desire to achieve recognition may be so great that schools often downplay areas in which they are weak and highlight their success in others rather than concentrate on overall improvement (Richard, 2000).

**Impact**

For the school reaching high levels of success, the Blue Ribbon program offers a way to acknowledge the achievements of the school and reflect on areas of potential improvement for the future. It is also a means to celebrate the hard work of students, staff members, families, and the community, while building awareness in the broader community of the school's excellence (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). The Blue Ribbon Schools Program has become a forerunner in national improvement programs, bringing a sense of community and honor to many of the nation’s schools. Moreover, this program has generated a climate of awareness as well as the basis for a continuous journey in the quest of academic excellence for all students. Positive attitudes, exemplary educational practice, and improved test scores became the primary focal point in hundreds of elementary, middle level, and high schools throughout the country. With its renewed emphasis on self-assessment, the program developed into a leading player among national school improvement strategies and many states now have related programs (Marzke et al., 1997).

**Professional Learning Organizations and Blue Ribbon Schools**

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program had the effect of stimulating and focusing school communities toward improvement initiatives. Educators who have gone through the process of leading their schools to the Blue Ribbon level, report that the process allowed
them to “deeply reflect upon the core values of the school organization” (U. S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 2). The importance of developing learning organizations has also been the recent focal point of many schools in restructuring efforts. To create learning organizations, those that adapt to new situations and continually grow, has required that organizations function differently than they have traditionally. This is a complex task requiring both individual and organizational learning (Senge, 1996). Senge described a learning organization as one that focused on five dimensions, including shared vision, team learning, mental models, personal mastery, and system thinking.

Louis and Kruse (1995) further refined these ideas through research in educational settings. They identified five main dimensions that defined a professional community to include reflective dialogue, educational practice, and a focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared values. They further suggested that it was shared values and reflective dialogue that were the most important factors in the creation of a true learning community. Wallace, Engel and Mooney (1997) established the importance of the reflective capacity of an organization by stating:

The learning school is one where all stakeholders engage in the continual reflection on practice to identify ways the organization of the school can be improved. The main focus is on improving student learning and providing the support conditions to facilitate that goal. A major part of that effort must be to establish the conditions where professionals and other stakeholders can create the sense of community as a learning organization. Not only teachers and administrators, but parents and community members must reflect on how they can contribute to the more effective operations of the school as a learning community. Parents and community members need to reflect on their roles in supporting the school and its main goal of improving student learning. In doing so, they model the essence of the learning community, the capacity to reflect on the current condition and the willingness to inquire about its improvement. Following reflection, the learning community accesses the specialized knowledge or expertise needed to move to higher levels of performance (p. 179).
While Louis & Kruse (1995) identified both shared values and reflective dialogue as crucial, Dufour (1999) identified a school’s capacity to function as a learning community as the most critical factor in significant school improvement. A sense of community among adults, when focused on professional responsibility and the central tasks of education, can reinforce and augment the talent, knowledge, and insight that individual teachers bring to their work. Some well-designed school restructuring efforts may stimulate teachers’ enthusiasm and satisfaction in their work, but without a professional community, most individual teachers will find it difficult to sustain the level of energy needed to reflect continually on and improve their practice (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

According to Little (1997), who wrote a working paper for the Blue Ribbon Schools Program entitled *Excellence in Professional Development and Professional Community*, schools considered to be outstanding were likely to be schools that:

1) Emphasized teachers’ individual and collective responsibility for student achievement and well-being, and make inquiry into student learning the cornerstone of professional development;

2) Organized teachers’ work in ways that demonstrably reduce teacher isolation and enhanced opportunities for teacher learning, both inside and outside the school;

3) Employed staff development resources in ways that increased the schools’ ability to acquire feedback on its own performance, evaluate emerging demands or opportunities, and made well-informed use of new ideas, materials, and colleagues;

4) Conducted staff evaluation and programs or school reviews in a manner consistent with teacher learning (Little, 1997).
Principal Leadership

Research clearly pointed out that school principals were vital to successful restructuring efforts (Newman, 1996). Without the school principal providing support for risk-taking, encouraging teacher leadership, and working on the myriad of processes necessary to implement improvements, change would never succeed. Deal and Peterson (1998) stressed that no matter how successful a school is, it must continuously seek new ideas and change practices or its spirit will wither and die. Furthermore, these researchers strongly emphasized that principal leadership is necessary to improvement and change. Principals are central to shaping a positive and professional school culture and climate. Their daily work and value-driven behaviors shape a set of underlying norms, values and beliefs that foster learning. Without leadership in this area, cultures can become stagnant and toxic.

In the face of intractable problems and sizable expectations, school leaders need clear vision, a strong knowledge base, highly developed communication skills, enlightened cultural sensitivity, and a deep commitment to educational outcomes (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Bolman and Deal also asserted that better education for more children in the face of dwindling resources and fiscal constraints requires school leaders who can mobilize people, groups, and community resources to confront and resolve challenging problems, moving schools toward the fulfillment of multiple goals.

One of the National Association of Elementary School Principals’ six standards for what principals should know and be able to do, calls on principals to put student and adult learning at the center of their leadership and to serve as the lead leader (2001). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), a program of the Council of
Chief State officers, has also identified six professional standards for principals, one of which calls for the principal to be an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (ISLLC, 1996).

Lambert (1998) believed leadership was about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. Leadership involves opportunities to become known, bring together perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire while generating ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to generate actions that grow out of these imaginative understandings. When the principal, as leader, supports a professional learning community, he/she helps develop a community with a shared purpose.

Acherman, Donaldson, and Van Der Bogert (1996) asserted that true leadership has no formula. Principals must constantly ask how the school's work and life fulfills its basic purpose and mission. Moreover, they need to seek remedies that fit each challenge, each child, and each situation. Blasé and Blasé (1998) found in a study of 800 teachers that the most effective principals developed a professional dialogue among educators. Specifically, the data demonstrated that the harmonizing, valuing, enabling, and modeling roles of good leaders promote the professional growth of teachers. Lambert (1998) believed that in order to build leadership capacity two critical conditions are necessary:

1) A school needs teachers who understand the shared vision of the school and the scope of the work to be undertaken, and

2) The school staff needs to be committed to fulfill its mission.
Fullan and Hargraves (1996) asserted that principals do not have a monopoly on vision. The leader alone cannot create a vision and expect others to successfully carry it out (Bolman & Deal, 1997). According to Bolman and Deal, research consistently suggested that nothing a principal does is more important than helping to build a school-wide commitment to educational outcomes. Fullan (1996) emphasized that shared vision, which is essential for success, must evolve through the interaction of organizational members and leaders. Finally, Evans (1996) noted that despite thousands of empirical studies yielding hundreds of definitions of principal leadership and change in schools, there is still no consensus about a definitive formula. However, it seems likely that leadership is a key component of successful schools.

Statement of the Problem

The last two decades witnessed the publication of A Nation at Risk by The National Commission on Excellence in Education. Since then, a national thrust for excellence in education guided the reform movement. Reflective of this push for national school reform was the emergence of the Blue Ribbon Schools Awards Program sponsored by the United States Department of Education. It borrowed from effective schools literature and adopted a mission to recognize schools that demonstrated exemplary education practices and student achievement and thereby provided models for change. Since 1982, the federal government has recognized more than 4,000 exemplary schools in the Blue Ribbon Schools Program. In recent years, the program added an emphasis on comprehensive self-assessment as a prelude to the school improvement process, and issued a call for schools to continuously share good ideas.
The Blue Ribbon Schools Program remains the forerunner in national recognition programs, however, a need still exists to fill the gap in research, to explore and better understand the process that leads to continuous improvement and change in schools, while giving meaning to the actions and dialogue of those actively involved. The Blue Ribbon nomination package offered a challenging place to begin. It immersed the school in a climate of deep assessment through data collection, discussion, and problem solving. This study sought to discover what participants actually perceived the experience to be, focusing not as much on the school as an organizational structure, but rather on schools in the act of organizing to meet a specific goal, in this case, the Blue Ribbon designation.

While there was much literature on school reform, little was available regarding school improvement processes and the underlying values expressed within the organizational cultures of Blue Ribbon Schools from different perspectives, and in a variety of settings. An attempt to better understand the essential elements that underscore successful school improvement efforts at the school site level, as deemed necessary, was the fulcrum upon which this study rested. Therefore, the researcher’s purpose for conducting this qualitative study was to examine and analyze the shared experience of principals and collaborative teams within selected schools that participated and achieved Blue Ribbon status. The researcher attempted to find out what participants experienced at selected elementary Blue Ribbon Schools in Georgia, thus providing information that may provide insight for others seeking support for educational change and improvement.

Research Questions

The study was designed to address the following overarching research question:
What are the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and principals regarding the process used
to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status? In addition, the study explored the following research sub questions:

1) What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue Ribbon status?

2) What role do teachers and principals play in the Blue Ribbon implementation process?

3) What aspects of the Blue Ribbon Schools process do teachers and principals believe had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and self-assessment at the school site level?

4) To what extent do collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall Blue Ribbon Schools process?

5) What are the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding professional growth and development?

6) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership?

7) How does the Blue Ribbon Schools process involve all relevant stakeholders?
Importance of the Study

The findings of this research could be informative for a number of audiences within the educational arena. Schools are under great pressure to change. Over the years public schools have become highly specialized, extensively regulated, and enormously complex organizations. The demands of our modern society are such that schools now are required to provide what they have never provided before, a first-rate academic education for all students. American education has entered a new era of accountability and standards movement that has forced schools to become much more data-driven and results-oriented. Increasingly, states are beginning to measure what students learn and
Students themselves must pass tests before graduating from high school, or in some cases, before they are promoted from grade to grade. Consequently, students, parents, teachers, and school principals are all expected to perform.

At present, numerous schools across the country have accepted the challenge of updating and upgrading their services. While the restructuring experience may vary from school to school, renewal efforts at any site can begin only with the initiation of honest dialogue at the school level. A learning community of professionals at the school level represents a viable context in which teachers and principals can share decision-making, collaborate on their practice, and hone their skills to increase student learning.

Maintaining an enduring focus on students is central to identifying and articulating purposeful intent for any school’s reform work. The current picture in society is at a point where schools are increasingly expected to compensate for changes in family structures, shifting trends in popular culture, poverty, violence, teen pregnancy, and general social upheaval.

To date, there has been little empirical research focusing primarily on the reflective capacity of school organizations. Needless to say, developing the capacity of individuals and staff members to engage in meaningful reform and restructuring to benefit students continues to be one of the greatest challenges for most schools. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the knowledge of the experiences of educators within successful schools as they collectively worked toward the goal of school improvement and/or recognition. While there was an abundance of literature on school reform, little has been available regarding school improvement processes and the underlying values
expressed within the organizational cultures of Blue Ribbon Schools from as many perspectives or in such a variety of settings. Because this study relied on the perceptions of its participants, it could aid in the understanding of the core assumptions and beliefs that contributed to the life world of good schools and attempt to inspire positive change in others. The natural extension of this work could contribute to theory, by assisting in the clarification of organizational learning by educators within successful schools. Current literature describes the attributes of a learning organization, as they exist in schools. However, what the research lacks is knowledge regarding the manifestation of these characteristics. Are there key elements in these schools that have made this transformation? If so, what are they? What processes or strategies were put in place to assist the growth and change of school staffs’ professional practices into a community arrangement? What motivated school administrators and school staffs to examine their actions collectively and deeply to make significant turnarounds in their practices? Can this learning be taught, or is it simply the result of keen awareness, intrinsic motivation, and the resulting actions on the part of school staffs and /or administrators? What, if any, of this information can be replicated in schools across the country?

In this study, factors associated with internal school improvement and research-proven strategies were explored. Ascertaining and articulating the stories of individuals who engaged in a successful school improvement endeavor such as the one found in the Blue Ribbon Schools, could help to clarify the roles of teachers and principals engaged in reform efforts. This study could further provide information about instructional leadership practices which could provide a supportive environment for change. Identifying leadership practices, which encourage teachers to reflect on their own
practice, could increase teachers’ perceptions of their own responsibilities as leaders in the learning community and further understand their shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students’ success. For practicing administrators, especially principals who are uncomfortable with the ambiguity of the instructional leadership role, this study could clarify specific behaviors—both task and time needed to support teachers and learners, as well as underlying beliefs and assumptions, which guide such a role. This foundation could provide a means by which principals could assess and develop their own competencies of effective leadership.

For policy makers, this study could provide information to aid their evaluation of the effects of standards, assessments, and accountability measures on actual practices. This research could, moreover, provide information beneficial to Curriculum and Staff Development Facilitators, in the area of specific professional development opportunities for administrators on how they could become more influential in assisting teachers in relationship building by developing a more collaborative work culture among staff. Moreover, RESA Intermediary Agencies, State Departments of Education and State Boards of Education may utilize this information to design and implement core leadership training programs with a focal point on managing, facilitating, and sustaining successful change efforts in various learning institutions.

From the very onset and well into this study, the researcher became increasingly aware of her personal biases towards the making of good schools. Over the course of nearly two decades in public education, this researcher has far too frequently been amazed at the incredible strides that certain schools have made in spite of the obstacles they faced. The researcher soon became more eager to determine what critical aspects, if
any, were influential at these successful schools that were not present at others. The researcher’s past and current experiences as teacher, staff development consultant and administrator at the school site level resulted in the need to explore more extensively the dynamics and holistic interpretations of what school communities were expected to do. Empirical research was desirable to further refine the theory and practice of collective reflection at the school site level. Therefore, the researcher's interest in this study was to seek the voices and explore more fully the perceptions and practices of teachers and principals who managed to transform their schools into results-oriented professional learning communities that ultimately led to a specific outcome, the Blue Ribbon status.

**Procedures**

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were selected to meet the objectives of the study. The quantitative data were collected by the use of a demographic questionnaire in an effort to gain a demographic profile of all participants in the study. This profile included gender, race, highest degree earned, and total years of experience in the field of education. The data were analyzed and calculated. The results were compiled and reported in tabular form. Two types of interview methods were also included in the research design, (a) the semi-structured individual interview method, and (b) the focus group. The researcher identified the Blue Ribbon elementary schools in Georgia from the U. S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School website. The academic years 2000-2003 were selected as the parameters of the study because the researcher was interested in seeking fresh recollections from interviewees who had recently engaged in the Blue Ribbon Schools process.
Creswell (1994) recommended the use of qualitative research when little information exists on a particular topic. Likewise, this qualitative research permitted the researcher to gain a better understanding of the individual’s point of view (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The strength of the qualitative method was its ability to delve into the complexities of various topics for which relevant variables had not yet been identified (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The qualitative method enabled the participants in the study to explore their own meanings based upon subject matter. It also aided the researcher in understanding naturally occurring phenomena in their naturally occurring states. The purpose of this research design was to obtain data to build theories that described the setting or explained a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). This approach allowed the researcher to listen to the conversations of groups of school personnel (Morgan, 1997).

The researcher used the description of the in-depth interview provided by Marshall and Rossman (1999) as the guideline for conducting the interviews:

Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s frames and structures through the responses. This, in fact, is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it, (p. 108).

Furthermore, the qualitative approach aided in disclosing and describing the participants’ perspectives, building trust and rapport with respondents (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Qualitative researchers strongly believed that the major advantage of the qualitative approach was its adaptability. This format provided opportunities to obtain more information and to clarify vague answers (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Gall, Borg, & Gall further contended that the qualitative design allowed the researcher to
obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.

The researcher traveled to each of the school sites to conduct the interview during the months of November 2004 - February 2005. Prior to visiting the schools, the researcher formulated a list of research protocol questions that served as a guide for discussion. They were based on questions prompted by the review of the literature that led to the development of the research study questions. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes as recommended by Seidman (1991), was taped, and was further documented with handwritten notes taken during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The researcher identified, coded and categorized the data and then used the computer program, QSR NUD.IST 5, to confirm the themes. The researcher was, thus, able to use the themes generated to fully report in narrative form the findings that emerged regarding the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and principals regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon School status.

Assumptions

Because a qualitative research design was employed to conduct this study, a number of assumptions were made concerning the findings. The researcher assumed the seven principals and selected school teams participating in the in-depth interviews and focus groups were honest, open and accurate when responding to the interview questions. Additionally, the researcher’s biases and values were a natural element of the emergent findings because the researcher was the primary instrument for the data collection and data analysis of the study. The reality constructed by the individuals involved in the study was subjective and interpretive.
Limitations

The study did not intend to serve as a panacea to educators, and many questions remain unanswered. When considering the value of this study, it is important to be mindful of its limitations. What may be considered limitations to one reader may not be to others. Nevertheless, the researcher provided the following caveat:

1) The researcher relied on the semi-structured, in depth interviews with principals, and focus group sessions with teachers as the primary method of data collection. The qualitative research process is an evolving process rather than a static one; consequently, the researcher anticipated modifications and adaptations to the initial plan for conducting the study. The findings from the study are not generalizable; the intent of qualitative research is to form unique interpretations of the data, not to generalize findings. The mission was to capture a more aggregated picture of seven elementary schools at one point in time. As in all qualitative research, the veracity of the results was reliant, in part, on the truthfulness of the participants and the lens of the researcher.

2) The interrelatedness of the seven themes in this study opened the possibility that they could have been grouped differently and still retain similar meaning.

3) The researcher did not gather quantitative test score data or other measures of school outcomes, and there is no claim made related to the connections between the themes revealed here and school outcomes. That is, there is no claim, here that there are any casual linkages that might exist between the themes and school outcomes. The purpose of this research was to identify the themes themselves;
establishing any causal connections between them and school outcomes must be the subject of future research.

Delimitations

1) The participants’ being elementary teachers and principals in Georgia, rather than in the Southeast or other parts of the United States, was a delimitation of the study.

2) Interviewing only elementary teachers and principals, and not those in middle or high schools, was a delimitation of the study.

3) Interviewing only those individuals who were employed at the time the study was conducted and not those who were formerly employed during the Blue Ribbon process was furthermore considered a delimitation.

Definition of Terms

In order to provide clarity and understanding, the following terms were defined.

Other terms were defined throughout the text.

*Blue Ribbon Schools Program* was established in 1983 by the U. S. Department of Education. It identifies and gives national recognition to a diverse group of public and private schools that are unusually effective in meeting local, state, and national goals and in educating all of their students. The program comprises the Elementary School recognition program and the Secondary School recognition program, recognizing elementary and secondary schools in alternate years. It is designed as a national school improvement strategy. The intent is to affect improvement through the collaborative self-evaluation required of local school communities that participate, and through the stimulus
that recognition provides, continues the pursuit of excellence (U. S. Department of Education, 2001).

*Collaboration* is the voluntary interaction of individuals to share information, create plans, evaluate programs, or share in decision-making.

*Collaborative Leadership* is the degree to which school leaders establish and maintain collaborative relationships with school staff; leaders value teachers’ ideas, seek their input, engage them in decision-making, and trust their professional judgments. Leaders support and reward risk-taking, innovation, and sharing of ideas and practices (Gruenett, 1998; Quinn, Gruenert & Valentine, 1999).

*Collegiality* refers to individual members of a school community committed to a common cause, sharing professional values that affect their collaborative activities (Sergiovanni, 1999).

*Community of Learners* is a concept of professional community described as teachers sharing a common core of educational values, while also sharing a sense of collegiality, and has an intensive collaborative relationship, both of which support continuing professional development, improved mastery of teaching, and a strong commitment to improving the work setting.

*Continuous Improvement* is the use of research findings, education reform reports, and/or the analysis of data (including data generated by the school) to foster a deeper understanding of the school’s goals, policies, and practices.

*Facilitator* is one who exercises powers of leadership through others (Lashway, 1995).
Instructional Leader is one who empowers others in the community of learners to develop and use the best teaching strategies and techniques. It is characterized by leaders who provide instructional resources, communicate effectively, and maintain a visible presence (Smith & Andrews, 1989).

Leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group toward goal achievement in a given situation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993).

Leadership Behaviors are behaviors that influence the motivation and productivity of others that are formed by experience, values, and training (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Learning Partnership is the degree to which teachers, parents, and students work together for the common good of the student. Parents and teachers share common expectations and communicate frequently about student performance. Parents trust teachers. Students generally accept responsibility for their schooling (Gruenert, 1998; Quinn et al, 1999).

Professional Development is any activity or process that emphasizes teachers’ self-realization, self-growth, self-improvement, or organizational growth and organizational improvement (Gruenert, 1998; Quinn et al, 1999).

Professional Learning Communities are characterized by the sharing of vision and values in a work-embedded environment. Furthermore, learning communities engage in collective inquiry, get collaborative involvement from teams of teachers, and embrace orientation and experimentation (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

School Culture is the guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates, particularly in reference to how people relate (or fail to relate) to each other. It
is the interwoven pattern of beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that define for members who they are and how they are to do things (Gruenert, 1998).

*School Improvement* is any systematic effort to improve the conditions of or the effects of schooling. The school improvement process is a model of professional development where participants are brought together to make decisions and changes in organizational plan and activities. It may require participants to review organizational programs, curriculum and instruction, or decisions on particular programs. The main advantage is the improvement of specific knowledge and skills of the participants due to increased awareness about issues (McCoy, 1995).

*Self-Renewing School* provides colleagueship directly within and across three spheres of the organization: the teacher, the school and the home.

*Shared-Decision Making* is the involvement of teachers in making decisions regarding issues delegated to schools.

*Stakeholders* are comprised of staff, teachers, students, parents, and the wider community.

*Teacher Collaboration* is the degree to which teachers engage in constructive dialogue that furthers the educational vision of the school. Teachers across the school plan together, observe and discuss teaching practices, evaluate programs, and develop an awareness of the practices and programs of other teachers (Gruenert, 1998; Quinn et al., 1999).

*Unity of Purpose* is the degree to which teachers, principal, and stakeholders work towards a common mission for the school (Gruenert, 1998; Quinn et al., 1999).
Summary

The United States Department of Education has been at the forefront of the restructuring movement in its attempt to provide guidance and direction to schools for over two decades. The strength of the Blue Ribbon Schools Awards Program has been its power to stimulate and focus on school improvement initiatives that offered promise in providing academic excellence for all students. Schools are continuously striving to achieve academic excellence. Educational communities know that they have a responsibility to educate America’s children and they want to do it well. But it is a reality that some schools are considered more successful than others.

This chapter presented an overview of the purpose and approaches to be used in the study as well as background information that adds meaning to the research on school improvement initiatives. Numerous salient issues were defined which were crucial to the understanding of the data to be collected. Reflection was seen as an essential part of professional practice. It allowed school administrators and teachers, as well as other stakeholders, to stop and contemplate actions, to derive meaning from experiences, and to bring processes alive. School communities are constantly engaged in collaborative learning and on-going school improvement efforts that subsequently have formed the cornerstone to organizational growth and capacity building. While the Blue Ribbon process immerses a school in a climate of deep assessment through data collection, collaborative inquiry, and problem-solving, it also gives a positive starting point for others by providing access to successful Blue Ribbon Schools.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature important to the understanding of the data to be collected. To better understand a process that led to continuous improvement and change in schools was the fulcrum upon which this study rested. A theoretical framework was used to help explicate narratives drawn from principals and school teams within seven elementary schools in Georgia who participated collaboratively and achieved the United States Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award. The review begins with an overview of the Blue Ribbon Schools movement with emphasis on a process-oriented approach for schools seeking to improve. Also included in this chapter are major research findings presented in the area of organizational culture as it relates to change, an examination of the leadership behaviors of the principal, the leadership capacity of teachers, and the concept of collaboration and reflection in school communities.

The Blue Ribbon Schools Movement

The U. S. Department of Education has been at the forefront of the restructuring movement in its attempt to provide guidance and direction to schools (Marzke, Fiester, & Mullen, 1997). Subsequently, the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program, sponsored by
the U. S. Department of Education in 1982, became one of the leading players among national school improvement strategies, whose major premise was to serve as an approved model of excellence and equity for less successful schools. Acclaimed for student achievement and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, the stated purposes of the program are threefold: (a) to identify and recognize public and private schools throughout the United States demonstrating significant academic improvement; (b) to make research-based effectiveness criteria available to all schools; and (c) to encourage schools to share information about best practices based on a common understanding of the criteria for educational success (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). The program made further assertions that the criteria were a basis for collaborative self-assessment, and that self-assessment is an effective school improvement strategy. “A school’s response to the overall framework provided a profile of its strengths and areas for improvement. The criterion offered was a useful tool for self-assessment, reflection, strategic planning, and involvement of all relevant stakeholders in a common project” (U. S. Department of Education, 1999, p. iii).

The selection of a school for recognition was largely determined by an evaluation of how well it has engaged in self-definition. Thus, parameters of a school’s success were measured by how well it had achieved its own goals, and how effectively it served students, their families, and the local community. Moreover, Blue Ribbon Schools were expected to offer instructional programs that met high academic standards, show evidence of learning-centered school environments, and document long term student assessment results that were above the average of other similar schools, therefore, giving
The Blue Ribbon Schools Program, a forerunner in national recognition programs, has developed into a leading school improvement initiative, with many school communities striving to meet the criteria (Marzke, 1997). Blue Ribbon Schools were identified as exemplary schools by the United States Department of Education through a rigorous nomination and review process at the state and national levels. Modeling both excellence and equity, a key indicator of success was that Blue Ribbon Schools had demonstrated student outcome results that were significantly above the average for comparable schools for the preceding five-year period (U. S. Department of Education, 1986). This program continues to serve as a self-assessment vehicle and renewal process for school members who engage in collective inquiry, reflection, and responsible decision-making about their learning. The use of research findings, education reform reports, and/or the analysis of data contributed immeasurably to fostering a deeper understanding of the school’s goals, policies, and practices (U. S. Department of Education, 2001).

**Organizational Culture**

School culture affects every part of the organization. Just as culture is critical to understanding the dynamics behind any thriving community, organization, or business, the daily realities and deep structure of school life hold the key to educational success (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Morgan (1997) suggested that culture might be the single most important factor in organizational success or failure. Organization culture, according to
Morgan (1997), was as an active, evolving phenomenon that organizational members created over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges.

Barth (2002) defined school culture as a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of an organization. He further noted that it was the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wielded astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they acted. Schools, like other organizations, develop a culture of behavioral norms that respond to the environment, to the people who work in the organization, and to those they serve (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Culture shapes a school’s motivation, commitment, efforts, expectations, and focus (Peterson, 1999). Deal & Peterson (1998) strongly believed that reforms that strive for educational excellence are likely to fail unless they are meaningfully linked to a school’s unique culture. Sergiovanni (2000) pointed out that through an understanding of culture; schools were better able to address issues of togetherness and community. Peterson and Deal (2002) described school culture as the key to productivity, noting that, “teachers and students were more likely to succeed in a culture that fostered hard work, commitment to valued ends, and attention to problem solving with a focus on learning for all students” (p. 11).

Peterson and Deal (2002) warned, however, that “Without supportive, student-centered cultures, reforms will falter, staff morale and commitment would wither and student learning would slip” (p. 30). Schools with positive organizational cultures, on the other hand, were identified as institutions that modeled a shared purpose and dedication to teaching. Schools that valued collegiality and collaboration resulted in a better climate for the social and professional exchange of ideas, the enhancement and spread of
effective practices, and widespread professional problem solving (Peterson & Deal, 2002). This set of informal expectations and values characterized how people thought, felt, and acted in schools. Culture, therefore, influenced the actions and the spirit of school life. People were motivated and feel committed to an organization that has meaning, value, and an enabling purpose (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Commitment grows in strong, caring social cultures. Strong professional cultures amplified the energy, motivation, and vitality of a school staff, students, and community (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Peterson (2002) added that by learning more about school culture, researchers could begin to understand the human dynamics that nurture and sustain meaningful changes in teaching and learning.

A study conducted by Bruner and Greenlee (2000) found that schools grouped by student achievement had significantly different cultures. High achieving schools were found to be more collaborative than low achieving schools, and had environments that supported the design and redesign of programs to meet the needs of students. These nurturing school cultures, according to Peterson (1999), were more likely to invest in professional development, spend more time learning new skills and knowledge, and enthusiastically engaged in their own learning.

In a study that examined the features of a school work culture and student achievement, it was found that schools with more developed and responsive work cultures generated more effective school-wide responses to the changing needs of students. These responses resulted in greater levels of student success (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2000). An extensive study of school restructuring illustrated conclusively that changing the structure of schools was not enough (Newman, 1996). To
have success, both new structures and a professional culture were needed. In this five-year study, the researchers found that school success flourished in cultures with a primary focus on student learning, a commitment to high expectations, social support for innovation, dialogue, and the search for new ideas. Also present was an “ethos of caring, sharing, and mutual help among staff, and between staff and students, based on respect, trust, and shared power relations among staff” (Newman, 1996, p. 289). Hargreaves (1997) noted that successful schools encouraged teacher risk-taking, learning from errors, and sharing good ideas in ways that lead to increased self-efficacy, higher expectations, and improved learning.

Spillane’s (1999) longitudinal study of math and science reform demonstrated that teachers who were most successful at improving instruction frequently engaged in ongoing deliberations with colleagues who were instrumental in helping them to translate new ideas into practice. In Coburn’s (2001) study, elementary teachers often met in teams to discuss strategies across departments in an attempt to make sense of reform during their discussions with colleagues. Teachers in her study subsequently gained a better understanding through feedback and insight during both formal and informal conversations. These conversations helped to shape the ways they decided which ideas to pursue and how they negotiated reform in the classroom.

Numerous studies of school change identified organizational culture as critical to the successful improvement of teaching and learning (Collins & Portas, 1997; Fullan, 1998). In these studies, it was determined that when culture did not support and encourage reform, improvement did not occur. In contrast, improvement efforts were likely to
emerge from positive professional cultures that had norms, values, and beliefs that reinforced a strong educational mission. Dufour & Eaker (1998) strongly emphasized that schools with positive cultures were those that embraced norms of performance, change, and efficiency, with staff gladly experimenting with new approaches as they sought innovative practices to solve enduring problems. A positive school culture encouraged learning and progressed by fostering a climate of change, support for risk taking and experimentation, and a community spirit valuing purposeful progress (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Culture, therefore was seen as a key factor in determining whether improvement was possible. Morgan (1997) added that school culture is what shapes the overall character of an organization.

Learning Communities

The sine qua non of a learning community is described as shared understandings, common values, and the collective commitment to the guiding principles that articulate what people in the school believe and what they seek to create (DuFour & Eaker, 2001). These guiding principles were not simply articulated by those in positions of leadership; they were embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school. A school that operated as a professional learning community recognized that its members must engage in ongoing study and constant practices that characterizes an organization’s commitment to continuous improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 2001). In a professional learning community, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (DuFour & Eaker, 2001). Senge (1996) noted “the rationale for
any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (p. 44).

Brown and Shepherd (1998) warned that society expects evidence of improved performance and that “all groups in education are in danger of being discarded and disregarded unless they provide that evidence” (p. 2). They argued that schools must reinvent themselves as learning organizations where collectively the staff makes the best decisions they can for the students they serve. Dubrin (1998) stated that a learning organization is skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge while modifying behavior to reflect new knowledge and insight. Leithwood (1998) further contended that the main challenge for those developing a learning organization “was to determine the organizational conditions that fostered individual and collective learning and to build those conditions into the school” (p. 215). DuFour and Eaker (1998) believed that ongoing improvement could succeed only when a community of colleagues supported each other through inevitable difficulties associated with school reform. It became increasingly clear that if schools were to improve for student learning, then schools would need to be improved by the adults who work within them. “We have only recently come to understand that student learning also depended on the extent to which schools supported the ongoing development and productive exercise of teachers’ knowledge and skills” (p. 42).

Professional learning communities encouraged teachers to reflect on their capacity to address the learning needs of students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Morrissey, 2000). According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), the engine of improvement, growth, and renewal
in a professional community is collective inquiry. People in such a community are relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results. DuFour and Eaker (1998) strongly believed that a persistent discomfort with the status quo and constant search for a better way characterized the heart of a professional community. Moreover, a commitment to continuous improvement becomes evident in an environment in which innovations and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to accomplish or projects to complete, but as ways of conducting day-to-day business. Members of a professional learning community recognize and celebrate the fact that the mission and vision are ideals that will never be fully realized, but must always be worked toward (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Morrissey (2000) conceptualized professional learning communities in five dimensions:

1. Supportive shared leadership,
2. Shared vision and values,
3. Collective learning and application of learning,
4. Supportive conditions, and
5. Shared persona practice

Hord (1997) stated that in order for collegial relationships to occur, there must be a widely shared vision, a sense of purpose, norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, respect, trust, and positive caring relationships amongst individuals. Collaboration with colleagues and interaction with students and colleagues are vital to successful school organization (Darling-Hammond, 1998). In a supportive professional
group, teachers work with each other and support each other as learners (Hord & Cowan, 1999). A collective learning atmosphere paves the way to professional learning communities within the school (National Foundation of the Improvement of Education, 1996).

Professional learning communities are characterized by the sharing of vision and values in collective inquiry, by acquiring collaborative involvement from teams of teachers, and by embracing action orientation and experimentation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). High level functioning of professional learning communities is often associated with the contextual features of successful schools (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). A continuing process of school renewal and everyday practice becomes the basis of all successful improvement efforts (Lieberman, 1999). Collegial relationships form an integral component of successful professional communities (Vukelich & Wren, 1999). According to these researchers, there must be collaborative efforts among teachers and institutions to realize change. There also needs to be collective responsibility for student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 1998). In addition, Leithwood and Louis (1998) maintained that a focus on student learning required shared visions and norms that are enforced and reflected in practice. When this occurs, collaborative efforts emerge while influencing and improving the achievement of all students (Kelly, 1999).

Scribner (1999) espoused the benefits of professional learning communities in his work with Hispanic schools. In these schools, which were at one time characterized as low-performing, the creation of learning communities assisted staff in overcoming the implementation problems that had accompanied past reform efforts and also increased student achievement. School staff learned to develop their own capacities in order to
produce improved student outcomes from year to year, despite increasing changes in their school and surrounding communities that made teaching and learning more challenging. Theissen and Anderson (1999) discussed means of transforming learning communities in which learning by teachers is connected to school improvement and improved learning for students. The authors encouraged collaboration, integration, and inquiry in schools, as well as continuous engagement in actions to challenge the conditions, the relationships, the responsibility and control, and the teaching and learning that shape a school. Through such ongoing inquiry, the authors agreed that schools became stronger and more productive where teaching improved and increased learning was evidenced by all students.

Professional learning communities are not a school reform, but rather the way schools can transform themselves. They give the organization the capability of responding to current reform initiatives, but also to the initiatives that will come (Leithwood & Louis, 1998). Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1997) characterized three core practices in a school based professional community: reflective dialogue among teachers about instructional practices and student learning; a common planning time in which teachers may observe each others’ practice and engage in joint problem solving; and peer collaboration where teachers engage in actual shared work. Research indicated that teachers who spend more time collectively studying teaching practices were more effective at developing higher-order thinking skills and meeting the needs of diverse learners (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Morrissey (2000) added, “A professional learning community that engages teachers in a culture of continuous inquiry and improvement will ultimately foster an environment that produces high levels of achievement for all students” (p. 7).
Understanding the Dynamics of Change

Managing the change process requires the ability to operate within a myriad of paradoxes (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Given that schools are open social systems and forces in their internal and external environments are likely to influence the interactions between and among their parts, change is likely to impact the entire organization (Green, 2001). As the pace of change increases, individuals begin to discover that new ideas, knowledge creation, and sharing become essential to solving learning problems in a rapidly changing society (Fullan, 2001). The primary purpose for change in schools is to improve the instructional program and, in so doing, improve student achievement (Green, 2001). When educational change is offered in schools, most individuals will agree that instructional improvement is needed; however, these change efforts often times will run into some form of human resistance (Kotter, 1999).

Transforming schools into professional learning communities according to DuFour and Eaker (1998) often generated an abundance of uncertainty, anxiety, and discomfort accompanied by pain and conflict. Fullan (2001) pointed out that conflict and anxiety were essential to any successful change effort. Hall and Hord, (2001) emphasized that at all levels- the individual, organizational, and system change is highly complex, multivariate, and dynamic. Kotter (2001) stated that,

All people who were affected by change experienced some emotional turmoil. Even changes that appear to be ‘positive’ or ‘rational’ will involve some degree of loss and uncertainty. Nevertheless, for a number of different reasons, individuals or groups tend to react very differently to change from passively resisting it, to aggressively trying to undermine it, to sincerely embracing it (p. 31).

Fullan (2001) cited that a culture of change consisted of great rapidity and nonlinearity on the one hand, and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on
the other. He further added that the paradox of transformation was not possible without accompanying disarray. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of change is less about innovation and more about innovativeness. It was less about strategy and more about strategizing (Fullan, 2001). DuFour and Eaker (1998) warned that anyone seeking to initiate substantive change in organizations must first recognize that an existing system with a well-entrenched structure and a culture were already in place. Furthermore, those working from within will always resist, fighting to preserve the old status quo. DuFour and Eaker (1998) further asserted that fragmented, piecemeal approaches to change that characterize most school reform efforts often lacked the power and focus needed to overcome the resistance.

Fullan (2001) believed that although change was considered a complex and formidable task; it was also viewed as an essential element. Furthermore, he added, the familiar status quo that seemed preferable remained until the traditional way of doing things results in ways that appear awkward to those in the organization. Therefore, change, according to Hall and Hord (2001), was a process through which people and organizations moved as they gradually came to understand, and became skilled and competent in the use of new ways. One of the most consistent findings and understandings about the change process in education was that all successful schools experienced “implementation dips” as they moved forward (Fullan, 2001). Fullan asserted that an implementation dip was literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encountered an innovation that required new skills and new understandings. Leaders who understood the implementation dip knew that people were experiencing two kinds of
problems when they were in the dip—the social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work (Goleman, 2000).

Goleman (2000) stressed that leaders need to employ affinitive and coaching styles in these situations. The affinitive leader paid attention to people, focused on building emotional bonds, relationships, and healing rifts. The leader as coach, according to Goleman (2000), helped people develop and invest in their capacity building. Kotter (1996) identified an eight-step process for initiating transformation in learning organizations:

1) Establish a sense of urgency
2) Create a guiding coalition
3) Develop a vision and strategy
4) Communicate the change vision
5) Empower broad-based action
6) Generate short-term wins
7) Consolidate gains and produce more change
8) Anchor new approaches in the culture. (p. 21)

As Kotter concluded, “Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to dreadful conditions as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed” (p. 14). DuFour and Eaker (1998) firmly believed that schools would never change until those within them felt a sense of urgency. Furthermore, those involved must come to the realization that the complexity and difficulty of change is a fact that cannot be overstated.
Education and Communication

In today’s schools, the importance of communication practices cannot be overemphasized. Through effective communication, relationships are built, trust is established, and respect is gained (Green, 2001). Furthermore, as Green noted, messages are transmitted, and the organization moves toward goal attainment. Effective communication is an essential component of the change process (Kotter, 2001). The importance of communication has been cited as “the one major lesson that has emerged from the extensive research studies on innovation, and the pathways for communication within an organization. Communication is the lifeblood of the school; it is a process that links the individual, the group, and the organization” (Lunnenburg & Ornstein, 1996, p. 176). Green (2001) added that when people communicate effectively, fear is removed from the workplace and positive emotions emerge, stimulating creativity. Subsequently, the communication process becomes a catalyst for efficiency. However, when people do not communicate effectively and are not in the communication channel, they will often feel unappreciated, misunderstood, defensive, and hostile, frustrated, or distressed (Sobel & Ornstein, 1996).

One of the most common ways to overcome resistance to change is to educate people about it beforehand. Communication of ideas helps people see the need and the logic of a change. The education process can involve one-on-one discussions, presentations to groups, and/or memos and reports (Kotter, 2001). According to Kotter, an education and communication program is essential when resistance is based on inadequate or inaccurate information and analysis, especially if the initiators need the resistors’ help in implementing the change. Participatory change is likely to have a better reception
(Green, 2001). With the onset of the reform movement, much has been written about using a participatory strategy and the advantages it offers for bringing about school change in an effective manner (Conley & Muncey, 1999). The work of these individuals has produced such program concepts and practices as site-based management, shared decision making, participatory governance, and others that advocate stakeholders collaborating with leaders in deciding how schools are administered. When a participatory strategy is used, change is made in a manner that allows all individuals or persons, desirous of the opportunity, to assist in the change process. They feel valued, take ownership for implementation of the change, and are willing to assume responsibility for outcomes (Barth, 1990). In addition, the ISLLC Standards (1996) strongly support this approach. When a participatory approach is used and school improvement committees have a voluntary membership comprised of representatives from all stakeholder groups, change is more effective (Fullan, 2001).

**Principal Leadership**

Research literature clearly pointed out that the principal plays a pivotal role in providing high quality learning in schools (Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Lambert, 1998). It was widely acknowledged that the role of the principal is crucial to a school’s effectiveness (Fullan, 2001). Recent reports indicated that this role is becoming more and more demanding as a result of successive waves of school reform (Lyons, 1999). According to Serns (1997) the goal of any improvement process in the schools should be improved through student learning. All other aspects of a school should support that goal. Therefore, Serns (1997) declared that as a site leader, the principal must make sure that the intent of the school is clear to all. He further stated that the leader must give
meaning to the mutually agreed upon vision. The leader must trust the collaborative wisdom of the teachers who take on collaboration. The leader, according to Serns, must be willing to collaborate to have collaboration occur. All of this requires a role redefinition for many principals.

Elmore (2000) stated that the leadership behavior of the principals is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of the people in the organization, creating a culture of expectations about the use of those skills and knowledge, holding various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective results. Fullan (2002) strongly believed that only principals who are equipped to handle the complex, rapidly changing environment and can implement reforms that foster the conditions necessary for sustained improvement, will be the leaders needed in a culture of change. Furthermore, he stated that principals must be attuned to the big picture, and be sophisticated conceptual thinkers who can transform the school organization through people and teams.

While Fink and Renick (2001) described the central role of the principal as one who can mobilize the energy and capacities of teachers, Terry (1999) described successful principals as measured by the improvement in the performance of others. He further stated that effective and skilled principals were those who were able to create, by both example and direction, an atmosphere that bred motivated and successful teachers, an excited and energized staff, and inspired and stimulated students in an effective school setting. Research consistently suggests that nothing a principal does is more important than helping build a school-wide commitment to educational outcomes (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Brown (1994) stated that a vision that places the student at the center of learning
must begin with school principals challenging their staff to examine current practices. Moreover, principals must then cultivate an environment for the development of a new vision that incorporates a view of teachers as facilitators, and students as actively engaged, collaborative, and thoughtful learners.

The review of literature acknowledged the argument that schools as centers of organizational learning will require leaders as described by Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt (1996) as “transformational leaders.” There is some evidence that Leithwood’s eight dimensions of transformational leadership correlated positively with successful organizational learning in schools. He described these dimensions as including practices aimed at identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and providing individualized support for staff members. Transformational leadership practices also aimed to stimulate organizational members to think reflectively and critically about their own practices and to provide appropriate models of the practices and values were considered central to the organization. Additionally, were high performance expectations building shared norms and beliefs (culture), and structuring the organization to permit broad participation in decision-making.

Conclusions from several studies on the relationship of transformative leadership to organizational learning have resulted in the identification of essential aspects of leadership necessary to facilitate the development of collective and individual learning (Leithwood et al., 1999). They included appropriate problem interpretation skills, faculty in collaborative goal development, role responsibility and knowledge as an important leadership value, the anticipation of constraints and obstacles that are likely to arise, the perception of obstacles to goal attainment as minor impediments, the capacity to learn
and build on the perceptions of teachers, the ability to anticipate and handle constraints flexibly, skill in maintaining a smoothly functioning group process, openness to new information, the ability to keep groups focused, checking for consensus, commitment to planning follow-up for group discussion, confidence, a strong reflective disposition, the ability to learn from experience, and the use of humor in tense situations. Collectively, these emerging aspects of successful transformative leadership behaviors suggested that the development of a viable community requires educational leaders who can engage in an on-going and reflective learning process, recasting themselves as a leader of leaders (Devos, Van den Brock, & Vanderheyden, 1998; Leithwood, 1998).

Short and Greer (1997) reinforced a new definition of the principal as one of empowering others, facilitating, and relinquishing control of decision making. Their studies have found that the principal’s role includes resource finder and student advocate. By providing a continuing focus on students, the principal functions as the conscience of the school. The principal’s actions and decisions are guided by a vision of education frequently created jointly with the staff and in all cases this vision is clearly and repeatedly articulated within the school learning community. Today the principal is seen as the educational manager, leader, and educator in the school. The creation of a learning community requires the principal to reexamine, redefine, and expand the multiple roles as principal. The principal must provide the facilitative leadership that will make a difference in the lives of children (Short & Greer, 1997; Lambert, 1998).

Recent research, theory and professional organizations (for school principals) recommended principals:

1) Have a vision for their schools;
2) Have clear and well-understood goals;
3) Establish a safe and positive school climate;
4) Focus on academics, teaching and learning, and
5) Practice shared decision making in concert with teachers, parents, and students.

According to Lyons, (1999) study, all principals interviewed stated that the
development of school goals was a shared process in their schools. In general, the
principals listed their most important roles in the following rank order:

1) Provided a safe school environment and a positive school climate
2) Fostered good teaching and learning
3) Communicated with parents and promoted good school community relations
4) Hired and developed a good staff
5) Monitored student progress
6) Managed school resources, i.e. budget, facilities, school property, etc.
7) Determined school goals
8) Lead, inspired, and motivated staff
9) Maintained a child-oriented school being an advocate for children
10) Maintained positive staff relations and staff harmony (Lyons, 1999)

Similarly in a study that interviewed 125 middle-school principals in Pennsylvania and
New Jersey, the qualities that made for an effective principal are listed as:

1) Having a very positive outlook about work, experience a high degree of job
   satisfaction, and view school problems as surmountable
2) Being more teacher-oriented
3) Being supportive of parent/community involvement in their schools
4) Having a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty

5) Being intentional in their efforts to assemble, develop, and maintain a staff of dedicated educators who want to be in a middle school (Anfara, Brown, Mills, Hartman & Mahar, 2000, p. 43-46).

According to California’s National Distinguished Principal, good leaders celebrated creativity and capitalized on others’ creativity while building schools on the foundation of trust, commitment, and fun. Successful leaders were optimistic, generated trust, rewarded innovation, created a safety net for risk-taking behavior, delegated authority, and led balanced lives (Cash, 1997). In a 1998 study of effective British principals, school staff agreed that successful heads were values-led, people-centered, achievement-oriented, inward/outward facing, and were able to manage ongoing tensions and dilemmas (Day, 2000).

In “Skills for Successful 21st Century School Leaders: Standards for Peak Performance,” Hoyle, English and Steffy (1998) espoused that the following skills were essential for an effective administrator:

1) Visionary leadership

2) Policy and governance

3) Communication and community relations

4) Organizational management

5) Curriculum planning and development

6) Instructional management

7) Staff evaluation and personal management

8) Staff development
9) Educational research, evaluation and planning

10) Values and ethics of leadership.

They further stated that effective principals must also be skilled team-builders, instructional leaders and visionary risk-takers. Additionally, they must exhibit integrity, embrace responsibility, and be open to taking on new roles.

According to Payne and Michailides (1998) the central factor in school success was the principal taking the lead role in having a vision for the school. This main role led to several subsidiary roles. These include illuminating the strengths of the school and the educational system; setting high expectations; empowering all staff members to stretch, grow and achieve; ensuring that all aspects of classroom and school activities were meaningful; being a team member and team player amongst the faculty; perceiving diversity as a strength rather than a weakness; being a risk-taker; and keeping the focus on the classroom. Principal behavior and attributes do significantly influence individual student achievement (Manges & Wilcox, 1997). These researchers emphatically believed that it was ultimately the role of the principal to lead reform in school. They further noted that the specific role of the principal should be to remove barriers that restrict the ability of the staff to focus on curricular improvements affecting teaching and learning. In addition, they noted that the attributes that allow principals to manage successful school reform were the very same that allowed principals to be successful in general (Manges & Wilcox, 1997).

Building Leadership Capacity

Capacity building is described as the creation of a flexible, synergistic organizational structure open to new and innovative ideas (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Furthermore,
capacity building included the usefulness of building an infrastructure of support that is aligned with the work of the school. This infrastructure usually involved the philosophy and mission of a school, the process for selecting personnel, resources, staff training, work structures, policies, and available outside networks (Lambert, 1998). In essence, leadership capacity building was defined as broad based, skilled participation in the work of leadership (Lambert 1998).

For decades, educators understood that they are all responsible for student learning. According to Lambert (2002), leadership was a shared community undertaking and the professional work of everyone in the school. By understanding that learning and leading are firmly linked in community, they took the first essential step in building shared instructional leadership capacity (Lambert, 2002). Moreover, in schools with high leadership capacity, learning and instructional leadership became fused into professional practice. Shared vision resulted in program coherence. Participants were able to reflect on their core values and weave those values into a shared vision to which all could commit themselves.

Generating shared knowledge became the energy force of the schools while teachers, principals, students, and parents examined data to find answers and posed new questions. Together they reflected, discussed, analyzed, planned, and acted (Lambert, 2002).

Lambert (1998) cited

The key to this broad view of leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface values, beliefs, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek, to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings (pp. 5-6).
Therefore capacity building required keen leadership and intense effort. As teachers and administrators developed shared leadership practices, opportunities for heightened collegiality that led to greater interdependence among teachers increased and professionalism became possible (Sergiovanni, 1999). Teachers must take the major responsibility for building leadership capacity in schools and ultimately for the work of school improvement. Teachers represent the largest and most stable group of adults in the school, and the most politically powerful (Lambert et al., 1997). Consequently, connecting teacher capacity building with leadership is essential in sustaining efforts of school renewal. Successful school restructuring efforts are firmly linked to student achievement and to the effective work habits of the adults within a school (Lambert, 1998).

The ultimate measure of the contributions of teacher leaders, proponents suggest, is the impact of teacher leaders on student academic performance. Many scholars assumed that one caused the other (Lieberman, 1999). Nevertheless, a study by Leithwood and Jantzi in 1999, indicated that while a multitude of qualitative studies suggested the efficacy of teachers as leaders, a few qualitative studies had tested this notion. The studies that tested it found no conclusive evidence to support any positive correlation between student achievement and teacher leadership. Leithwood’s study, involving a sample of 1,762 teachers and 9,941 students in a large Canadian School district, not only found no impact of teacher leadership on raising student achievement, but also hypothesized that by trying to combine leadership with teaching, teaching was devalued. Barriers such as too little time during the work day for reflection, rigid school schedules, unrelated instructional tasks, jealousies and/or lack of support from peer teachers and
administrators, and overemphasis on state mandated high-stakes testing hampered the effectiveness of many teachers who, while teaching, stepped beyond their classrooms to lead (Paula and Winters, 1998).

Over the last two decades, much has been written about the need to develop the teacher leadership capacity in schools. In 1986, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy reported that unless teachers are empowered and supported as professionals, schools would not be able to sustain significant change through school reform efforts (Wynn, 2001). Moreover, several studies released, concluded that teachers needed to fully participate as leaders in the process of whole-school change, if reform was to be successful (Conley & Muncey, 1999; Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997). In addition, several studies indicated that one of the most significant developmental skills was for teachers to become active researchers in their classrooms and schools.

Teacher leadership capacity building focused primarily on systemic processes and structures that supported the development and sustained support of teacher leaders. In the school setting, teacher leadership capacity building meant placing professional development at the core of teacher work to ingrain the value of continuous professional learning throughout teachers’ careers (Scribner, 1999). Organizations that fostered knowledge giving as well as knowledge seeking would invariably generate norms of sharing with others which is the endeavor to continual growth for all (Fullan, 2002).

Teaching is both an intellectual and a moral profession; therefore, teachers engaged in practicing, studying, and refining the craft of teaching and learning are what generates the building of capacity at all levels (Fullan, 2002). A review of literature indicated that the empowerment of teachers focused on some of the same constructs as capacity
building (Fullan, 1999). In a 1998 study, the essential components of empowerment delineated teachers’ perceptions of possession of involvement in decision-making opportunities for professional growth, being esteemed as professionals, professional competency to effect student learning, autonomy in their work life, and their impact on school life (Rutter, 1985). Empowerment, therefore, focused on the development of personal competence as well as the opportunity a person has within the organization to demonstrate that competence. Empowerment was seen as a component of capacity building, however, not synonymous with capacity building. A review of the two concepts clearly indicated that teachers functioning in a school where capacity building was in progress, felt empowered. This notion became evident by a report of teachers experiencing the development of personal competence and being afforded opportunities within the organization to demonstrate their competence (Fullan, 1998).

Glickman (1998) observed that “empowered individuals and groups were more likely to develop beliefs, values, norms, and assumptions that are congruent with risk taking, experimentation and continuous improvement” (p. 443). Empowerment was made possible through the development of policies that supported positioning the wherewithal for schools to grow professionally along with the necessary resources to complete the task. According to Lambert (1998) the level to which teacher leader capacity had been built in a school could be determined by assessing the level to which each of the descriptors have been achieved. The descriptors are:

1) Broad-based participation in the work of leadership - inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the work of leading
2) Skillful participation in the work of leadership - teachers demonstrating effective communication skills as they lead other teachers

3) Inquiry-based use of information to inform shared decisions and practices that teachers use in effective questioning strategies to solicit information that assist in the shared decision making process

4) Roles and responsibilities that reflect broad involvement and collaboration - teachers assuming roles outside the traditional teaching role that allows all teachers to be involved in collaborative leadership

5) Reflective practice/innovation and the norm - teachers asking questions of themselves and others and taking risks in innovative practices and,

6) High student achievement - teachers focusing their efforts on improving student achievement (Lambert, 1998, pp.16-17).

Joyce and Calhoun (1996) found that collaborative work structures increased the involvement, engagement and affiliation across staff. Both professional potential and human needs were satisfied, as was the moral purpose that could be rendered dormant by the stifling constraints of traditional hierarchical school structures. Teachers were motivated through seeing their professional skills valued and by being offered opportunities to share with and to lead others, by having their capacities continually expanded and by feeling that their school was making a difference in the lives of young people. Growth in individual capacity brought about a change in self-perception and roles (Lambert 1998). Lambert further asserted that as roles changed, new behaviors emerged. Staff members began to articulate their beliefs and analyze data in ways that promoted collaborative engagement. The goal of shifting roles enabled each participant
to take responsibility for their classroom, the school, the community, and the profession. Moreover, as roles changed, relationships changed, creating opportunities for new ways of learning together.

_Professional Growth Opportunities_

Professional development is about change and renewal (Moore, 2000). It serves as a bridge between where prospective and experienced educators are now and where they will need to be to meet the new challenges of guiding all students in achieving higher standards of learning and development (Guskey, 2000). According to Moore (2000), professional development provided the catalyst for professional growth. It was considered a vital and daily aspect of teachers’ work and of their personal and professional identities. Professional development sparked curiosity, motivation, and new ways of thinking. It empowered teachers to become engaged in problem solving skills and self-renewal. Consequently, teacher engagement paved the way to success of professional growth (Vukelich & Wrenn, 1999).

Darling-Hammond (1998) contended that teachers should promote their own professional growth as active learners and decision makers. Professional development successes were achieved through teachers’ leadership and influence in professional advancement plans and collaborative learning (McCabe, 2001). Teachers learned through their involvement in defining and shaping the problems of practice (Lieberman, 1998). Halligan (1999) affirmed that collaborative critical inquiry was an integral part of a teachers’ professional growth and its development positively influenced student learning. Quality professional development expanded the capacity of the learning community to realize its vision and reach its goals (Lieberman, 1998). Moore (2000)
emphasized professional development as an indispensable vehicle that teachers used daily to strengthen their interactions with children and families, to improve work experiences, to increase the quality of instructional programs, and to achieve local, state and accreditation goals.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) further stressed that effective professional development programs increased teachers’ understanding of how to provide school environments and instructions that were responsive to the developmental needs of students. In addition, professional growth fostered a norm of continuous improvement by providing the knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding organization development and systems thinking. The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (1996) released their report, *Teachers Take Charge of Their Own Learning* (Scribner, 1999). The report revealed that the organization of time, teachers’ roles in developing professional development programs, their important roles in community organizations, and funding are issues that teacher believe impact the quality of professional development. A continuing process of school renewal and everyday practices became the basis of all successful professional development (Lieberman, 2002). Involving everyone in the organization in school-based decisions was integral to enhanced school operations. A school committed to improving professional development provided opportunities for teachers to develop theoretical understanding of knowledge (Hawley & Valli, 1998). Furthermore, Hawley and Valli contended that meeting educational standards meant providing opportunities for learning and evaluating the teacher-learning process.

Sparks and Hirsh (1997) argued that a comprehensive staff development program improved the ability of educators to help all students achieve the intended results of the
school. This focus on student results meant that professional learning communities assigned a higher priority to building the collective capacity of the group than the knowledge and skills of individuals. Teaching teams worked together to develop ideas and strategies for implementing the curriculum while helping to expand the repertoire of teachers to meet the needs of students who learn in different ways. Therefore, high quality staff development played an integral part in the creation and operation of a professional learning community.

In a study by Ornstein and Behr-Hornstein (1999), research clearly indicated that involving participants in key decisions about professional development was necessary for a program to have its greatest impact. A supportive context for professional development requires both a “top-down” and “bottom-up” approach. The top-down component sets a general direction for the district, or school, and communities expectations regarding performance. The bottom-up processes involve teachers in establishing goals and designing appropriate professional development activities. Hawley and Valli (1998) acknowledged the need to relate professional development to the needs of individuals in schools. They proposed eight characteristics that embodied the recent synthesis of literature on professional development and the national call for action. Professional development, including “substantial elements” of these design principles, would be more likely to affect changes in the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of educators that would result in enhanced student learning:

1) Is driven fundamentally, by analysis of the differences between the goals and standards for student learning and student performance;
2) Involves learners (e.g. teachers) in the identification of what they need to learn
and, when possible, in the development of the learning opportunity and/or the
process to be used;

3) Is primarily school-based and integral to school operation;

4) Provides learning opportunities that relate to individual needs, but are for the most
part, organized around collaborative problem solving;

5) Is continuous and on-going, involving follow-up and support for further learning -
including support from sources external to the school;

6) Incorporates evaluation of multiple sources of information on outcomes for
students and processes that are involved in implementing the lessons learned
through professional development;

7) Provides opportunities to engage in developing a theoretical understanding of the
knowledge and skills to be learned;

8) Integrated with a comprehensive change process that deals with the impediments
to and facilitation of student learning (Hawley & Valli, 1998, pp. 15-16).

With this approach, professional development was seen as an on-going process and
occurred at every moment that the teaching-learning mechanism was taking place in
school (Guskey, 2000). Advocates of professional growth for teachers claimed that when
professional development opportunities are sustained and intensive, they consist of
lasting activities that aim to improve student learning (Ohlund & Nelson, 2001).
Research further suggested that perhaps corresponding emphasis should be placed on
identifying ways for teachers to become more active in the development of in-service
training programs that meet their needs and interests rather than subject them to a passive role (Good & Brophy, 1997).

In a similar study, Bunting (1997) advocated that one promising approach was to target teachers as sources of energy, creativity, and expertise in their own growth. Such a teacher-centered approach encourages teachers to create and direct personalized plans for growth, and to look to each other for help and support. By tapping their ability to act as catalyst, motivators, and resources for each other, teachers create powerful learning opportunities and lessen dependency on outside experts. Teachers learning with and from one another, both formally and spontaneously, create an ideal climate for professional development.

**Reflective Practice**

Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest in reflection as a tool for improving practice in education. Essential to the development of reflective practice was the opportunity for teachers to communicate with colleagues and discuss experiences as the basis for their reflections (Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). The concept of reflective practice had been integrated into the mantra of education leaders as a worthwhile attribute that should be incorporated into every teacher’s repertoire. It had long been seen as pivotal within the teaching process. The esteemed educator, John Dewey (1938, as cited in Black, 2002) described reflection as a way of ‘being a teacher.’ Research suggested that reflection is at the heart of effective educational practice (Thomas, 1998; Sweeney, 1998; Black, 2002). These researchers suggested that practitioners who analyzed the uniqueness of a problem by confronting them, who framed the problem in ways that structured its intelligibility, who thought about the
results of their actions and puzzled out why things worked and why they did not, tended to build up a reservoir of insights and intuitions which they could call upon as they went about their work.

Professional development was grounded in inquiry. In addition, analyzing and reflecting on teachers’ own practice to improve instruction and assess the effects on teaching were paramount in teacher professional growth (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Documentation and evaluation of student learning encouraged teachers to reflect upon their practice, beliefs, and knowledge (Dorfman, 1997). Teacher reflection was an important component of professional enrichment (Vukelich & Wren, 1999). Professional enrichment that involved teachers reflecting on their practice and building knowledge paved the way for improvement of students’ academic achievement (Kelly, 1999). Therefore, many forms of reflection became integral parts of the school: reflection on beliefs; reflection in action; in practice and past practice; assumptions, collective reflection during dialogue; and in coaching relationships (Lieberman, 1998).

Freidus (2000) examined a graduate teacher education program regarding the context of reflective practice at the school level. Evidence from this research suggested that reflective practice fostered a sense of community, developed new reflective habits of mind, and resulted in a greater degree of expressive dialogue from participants.

Collaboration

Collaboration has garnered increased attention in recent years as a significant component to educational renewal. In fact, collaboration was characterized as an effective means whereby administrators, faculty, and staff were able to facilitate group decision-making in planning, program implementation, and program evaluation as a
primary means to achieve desired results (Idol, 1997; Tulbert, 2000). Similarly, Mostert (1998) defined collaboration as a professional interaction between and among professionals, parents, and families, and students themselves to share information through collective decision making to develop effective interventions that are in the best interest of the student (Mostert, 1998). Problem-solving, according to Mostert (1998) has become a recurrent theme in most definitions and characterizations of collaboration.

In their review of the literature, Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, and Riley (1997) identified five fundamental characteristics of collaboration:

1) A shared vision for student learning and teaching;
2) Common commitment to collaboration;
3) Communities of care;
4) Frequent, extended, positive interactions between faculty and leaders; and
5) Administrative leadership and power sharing.

Welch (1998) enumerated seven components of collaboration: (a) interactive exchange of resources, (b) decision-making, (c) problem-solving, (d) conflict management, (e) interpersonal communication, (g) cultural influences, and (h) systematic influences. Decision-making, problem-solving, conflict management, and interpersonal communication were depicted as discrete sets of skills that were necessary for collaboration. These clusters of skills reflect the competencies identified and articulated by other researchers as necessary (Sarkar, Cavusgil, & Evigen, 1997; West & Cannon, 1998). The power of collaboration was seen in self-renewal, staff development, shared inquiry, community building, and practical application of theory (Serns, 1997). Serns strongly believed that all of these elements are crucial to successful organizations.
Collaboration provided opportunities to bring harmony to theory and practice while establishing a sense of continued obligation between the teaching community and the teaching profession. Fostering collaboration in schools allowed teachers the opportunity to examine and test new ideas, methods, and materials, while subsequently expanding their own pool of ideas, methods, and materials. This led to the implementation of research and best practices (Sparks, 1998).

Fullan (2001) pointed out that collaboration addressed the essential social dimensions of school improvement for teachers who were essentially the members of meaningful and purposeful collaborative groups consistently promoting collective improvement. It allowed for continuous learning and for continued professional growth. Serns (1997) added that another important aspect of collaboration was the development of a support group that is established as a result of the process. This group served as an extended network that becomes manifested in both the desire to improve student outcomes and the desire to expand the application of content. This common experience, shared vocabulary, and personal connection, links people together. The group subsequently took on new leadership roles because of its unique ability to construct meaning and develop instructional methodology. The power of working together to seek common understanding allowed teachers to better their craft and refine their practice (Serns, 1997).

Collaboration was incorporated into professional standards and competencies by organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and the Council of Exceptional Children to prepare prospective teachers and special educators (Welch, 1998). Aside from professional organizations, collaboration was seen as an
important mechanism for promoting leadership, and a sense of community at the micro level in schools (Crow, 1998; Pounder, 1998). Schools evolved into collaborative organizations where educators were asked to share information and work together (Barott & Raybould, 1998). Therefore, collaboration was characterized as “one of the many bandwagons in the parade of education reform rhetoric” (Welch, 1998, p. 26). It became clear that the effort to transform a school into a collaborative learning community was more likely to be sustained when teachers participated in reflective dialogue, observed and reacted to one another’s teaching, jointly developed curriculum and assessment practices, worked together as a team to implement new programs for action research and continuous practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) further asserted that although teachers may not have the time, structure, and training afforded to engage in collaboration, one prerequisite remained, that they acknowledged their responsibility to do so. Creating a collaborative environment, therefore, was portrayed as the single most important factor in sustaining the effort to create a learning community. Thus, meaningful collaboration as it exists must subsequently be embedded into the daily life of the school (DuFour & Eaker, 2001). A culture of collaboration, in which all members of the community contribute to the achievement of shared goals, has the potential to lead to more effective decision making processes and improved outcomes (Fullan, 2000). According to Harris (2000), at the core of any school improvement effort is a whole new way of school communities working together. Schools engaged in school improvement, as cited by Harris, must be willing to afford everyone the opportunity to function as leaders and decision-makers as they attempt to bring about fundamental changes.
Shared Values and Vision in Learning Communities

Research and practice have demonstrated the important role that shared values and vision play in organizations (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Hord (1997) defined vision as a concept in a learning community that leads to norms of behavior that have a primary focus on student learning and are supported by staff members. Sergiovanni (2001) described schools as “nested communities,” in which collections of people are tied together by common foundational values. These values lead to “commitment to both individual rights and shared responsibilities” (p. 88). Furthermore, according to Sergiovanni, common values do exist in schools. Values were the conscious expressions of what an organization stood for (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Moreover, values were not simply defined as goals or outcomes but rather a deeper sense of what was important. Values define success (Deal & Peterson, 1998). DuFour and Eaker, (1998) implied that once the members of a school organization agreed on its true purpose, and the necessary steps to achieve its mission, the entire school community could subsequently address the issues of shared values and goals.

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), a statement of core values clarified how individuals proposed to make these shared visions a reality. In the context of organizational development, values characterized the fundamental means of school improvement because it challenged the people within the organization to identify the specific attitudes, behaviors, and commitments they must demonstrate in order to progress toward their vision. Research findings from educational settings consistently cited the identification of core values as critical elements in ensuring the success of any improvement initiative. The significance of shared values has emerged as a prominent
theme in the literature on organizational effectiveness (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; Lezotte, 1997). Most importantly, shared values provided the direction that enabled individuals to act autonomously, fostered strong feelings of personal effectiveness, promoted high levels of loyalty, facilitated consensus about key organizational goals, encouraged professional behavior, and promoted strong norms of professionalism (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). DuFour and Eaker (1998) maintained that the concept of shared vision established specific standards of excellence and benchmarks by which individuals could measure and work toward. It created a clear agenda for action (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

**Summary**

The review of literature has presented an abundance of information aimed at promoting school improvement and change. It, furthermore, offered a series of tools that could be used to audit the effectiveness with which educators could use to communicate what is important. The practices were consistent with current research findings and represented the best hope for sustained improvement in learning communities. It has become clear, however, that sustaining any improvement initiative requires attention to anchoring changes in the school’s culture - the assumptions, beliefs, values, and the habits of mind that constitute the norm.

As the participants in the Blue Ribbon process amply demonstrated, school improvement is an interconnected endeavor and works best when activities occur simultaneously and collaboratively in pursuit of a shared goal. A number of studies had been conducted on school reform; however, little had been available regarding school improvement processes and the underlying values expressed within the organizational
cultures of Blue Ribbon Schools from different perspectives and in a variety of settings. This study added to the existing body of literature concerning successful school reform efforts and change. An attempt was made to fill the gap in the existing literature as the researcher acquired a more complete portrait of the shared experiences of teachers and principals who engaged in the process of becoming a Blue Ribbon School. By seeking to unmask the participants’ feelings, thoughts, and experiences, the findings of research in the educational field will be expanded.
Table 1

Studies Related to Organizational Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Design/Analysis</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruner &amp; Greenlee (2000)</td>
<td>To investigate and compare characteristics of low vs. high achieving schools; studied work culture, restructuring &amp; student achievement</td>
<td>Teachers, administrators @ elementary schools; utilized Florida Vital Signs Criterion</td>
<td>The School Work Culture Profile; volunteer surveys 69% participated Five point Likert scale</td>
<td>Discovered that schools grouped by student achievement had significantly different cultures. High achieving schools were more nurturing, more collaborative than low-achieving schools and had environments that supported the design and redesign of programs to meet the needs of all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acker-Hocever &amp; Snyder, (2000)</td>
<td>To examine the features of school work culture and student achievement; used a comprehensive school reform model (Success for All)</td>
<td>3 Title I elementary schools</td>
<td>Qualitative/Quantitative data used; exploratory/investigative model</td>
<td>Schools with more developed and responsive work cultures generated more effective school wide responsiveness to the changing needs of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman (1996)</td>
<td>5-year study exploring restructuring and school culture</td>
<td>200 teachers in Idaho in teams of 4-6; building administrators, and content specialists</td>
<td>Exploratory design qualitative study</td>
<td>Researchers found that school success flourished in cultures with a primary focus on student learning, a commitment to high expectations, social support for innovation, dialogue, and the search for new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins &amp; Portas (1997)</td>
<td>To explore and examine the relationship of school change and organizational culture on teaching and learning</td>
<td>Teachers and administrators in school environment</td>
<td>Qualitative methodology</td>
<td>Concluded that organizational culture was critical to the successful improvement teaching and learning. When culture did not support and encourage reform, Improvement did not occur. Improvement efforts only occurred in positive professional cultures that had norms, values, and beliefs that reinforced a strong educational mission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cawelti (1999)</td>
<td>To identify diverse approaches to improve academic instruction with predominately low outcome based environment; determined strategies used to promote school’s effectiveness</td>
<td>Diverse selected school teams in New York, Texas, Ontario, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kansas</td>
<td>Case studies Quantitative surveys</td>
<td>Schools were characterized as having a professional collegial environment; committed to the mission and goals of the school, which ultimately led to increased academic achievement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2

### Studies Related to Learning Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Design/Analysis</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leithwood &amp; Jantzi (1999)</td>
<td>To examine the relationship of transformative learning to organizational learning</td>
<td>54% females, 64% males, 75% 59 yrs old, 23% principals, 57% teachers, 23% head-teachers, 15% support staff</td>
<td>Factor analysis using SPSS to determine validity of leadership proposed by Bass Avollo (1997) and school learning culture mode by Maehr</td>
<td>Identified essential aspects of leadership to facilitate the development of collective and individual learning; collaborative goal-development; found role responsibility openness to ideas, collective commitment, humor in tense situations, reflective practices resulted in high results in positive learning climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scribner (1999)</td>
<td>To explore the benefits of promoting a professional learning community and its effects on student achievement</td>
<td>3 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 3 high schools: 66.6% Mexican American students</td>
<td>Multi-Cultural research design; qualitative analysis, interpretive techniques</td>
<td>Found that the creation of learning communities within the school assisted staff in overcoming the obstacles and barriers of implementation problems that had accompanied past reform efforts; staff developed own capacities to improve student achievement; increased in all areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coburn (2001)</td>
<td>To examine reflective practice and the creation of learning communities to determine the success of teaching and learning</td>
<td>Elementary teachers</td>
<td>Case study design</td>
<td>The outcome of this research study enabled the researchers to gain a better understanding of strategies aimed at student success, was also determined that on-going conversations, collective inquiry, and collaborative work culture enabled teams to become a community of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis, Kruse, &amp; Marks (1996)</td>
<td>To explore the elements of a professional learning community and the success of improvement initiatives on student achievement</td>
<td>Elementary, middle, and high school teachers</td>
<td>Qualitative design, interviews, and focus groups</td>
<td>Findings suggest that the elements of a professional learning community created positive results; professionals had shard values, higher levels of loyalty, group consensus, and norms that resulted in a positive and nurturing school environment*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Findings based on qualitative research methods.
### Table 3

**Studies Related to Reflective Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Design/Analysis</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhinehart (1998)</td>
<td>To explore the major components of empowerment, reflective practice among teachers &amp; collaboration on improved student learning</td>
<td>Teachers in 20 rural school districts in Appalachia Unit 08 in Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Short &amp; Rhinehart’s School Participant Empowerment Scale &amp; Leadership Questionnaire (survey)</td>
<td>Improved student learning was evident in work cultures that promoted collective decision making, opportunities for professional growth, capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freidus (2000)</td>
<td>To examine a graduate teacher ed. program that promoted reflective practice &amp; empowerment at the school level</td>
<td>10 associates 9 females 1 male 20-35 yrs of age</td>
<td>Focused group Reflective questioning Professional learning cycle identified by Dietz</td>
<td>Reflective practice fostered sense of community, developed new reflective habits of mind and a greater degree of expressive dialogue from participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownell, Yeager, Kennels, and Riley (1997)</td>
<td>To identify characteristics and benefits of collaboration in school communities</td>
<td>Elementary teachers</td>
<td>Focused group, and interviews</td>
<td>School cultures flourished in collaborative environments that promoted shared vision; common commitment; communities of care; frequent, positive interactions between staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis, Kruse &amp; Marks (1996)</td>
<td>To explore elements of professional learning community, reflective practice, and the success of improvement initiatives</td>
<td>Elementary, middle, and high school teachers</td>
<td>Qualitative design, interviews, and focus groups</td>
<td>Findings suggest consistently the critical elements; shared values, personal effectiveness, high levels of loyalty, group consensus, norms of professional community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Studies Related to Principal Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Design/Analysis</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hoyle, English &amp; Steffy (1998)</td>
<td>To investigate the skills and standards that represent a broad consensus of what research shows as essential; for an effective administrator</td>
<td>School level administrators</td>
<td>Focus groups, study groups, interviews, qualitative methodology</td>
<td>It was determined that the following were effective skills: visionary leadership, good communication, promotes community of learners, community relations, knowledgeable, instructional manager, promotes staff development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anfara, Brown, &amp; Snyder (2000)</td>
<td>To explore the qualities of an effective middle school principal</td>
<td>125 middle school principals in Pennsylvania and New Jersey</td>
<td>Qualitative method: surveys and semi-structured interviews of 175 middle school principals</td>
<td>Principals who have a positive outlook about work, a high degree of job satisfaction, are teacher-oriented, have a high tolerance for ambiguity managed to maintain a dedicated staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leithwood (1999)</td>
<td>To explore the relationship of transformative leadership to organizational learning</td>
<td>Certified teachers in a variety of structured school environments</td>
<td>Quantitative &amp; qualitative methodology</td>
<td>Determined the critical aspects were: collaborative goal development, development of collective &amp; individual learning, openness to new information and strong reflective disposition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Studies Related to Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Design/Analysis</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhinehart (1998)</td>
<td>To explore the major components of empowerment and collaboration on improved student learning</td>
<td>Teachers in 20 rural school districts in Appalachia Unit 09 (Pennsylvania)</td>
<td>Short &amp; Rhinehart School Participant Empowerment Scale &amp; Leadership Questionnaire (survey)</td>
<td>Improved student learning was evident in work cultures that promoted collective decision making, opportunities for professional growth and capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freidus (2000)</td>
<td>To examine a graduate teacher education program that promoted collaboration, empowerment and reflective practice at the school site level</td>
<td>10 associates 9 females 1 male 20-35 years of age</td>
<td>Focus groups reflective questioning, used the professional learning cycle identified by Dietz</td>
<td>It was determined that collaboration, reflective practice fostered a sense of community, developed new reflective habits of mind and a greater degree of expressive dialogue from participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownell, Yeager, kennels, and Riley (1997)</td>
<td>To identify characteristics and benefits of collaboration</td>
<td>Elementary teachers</td>
<td>Focus groups Interviews</td>
<td>School cultures flourished in collaborative environments that promoted shared vision, common commitment, communities of care, frequent, positive interactions between staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conley &amp; Muncey (1999)</td>
<td>To examine and analyze the benefits of teacher engagement, collaboration</td>
<td>Elementary, middle, high school teachers</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative methodology</td>
<td>Teachers needed to participate as leaders in collaborative teams in whole-school reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Design/Analysis</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ornstein and Behr</td>
<td>To determine the characteristics of an effective professional development program</td>
<td>Numerous educators, particularly teachers at the school site level</td>
<td>Quantitative &amp; qualitative methodology</td>
<td>Effective practices consisted of the following: conducted in school settings and linked to school-wide efforts, teachers as helpers to each other and as planners, emphasis on self-instruction, with differentiated opportunities, teachers in active roles, choosing goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1995)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus groups &amp; interviews</td>
<td>Acknowledge the need to relate professional development to the needs of individuals in schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawley &amp; Vallie</td>
<td>Proposed eight characteristics likely to affect change in the knowledge skills and behaviors of educators to enhance student learning</td>
<td>Practicing educators at all grade levels teachers)</td>
<td>Quantitative &amp; qualitative surveys</td>
<td>Discovered best approach to staff development: teachers serving as coaches and resources for one another, using reflective practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative, focus groups and interviews</td>
<td>Stressed that schools help to develop teachers in job-related discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunting (1997)</td>
<td>Explored and examined effective ways to motivate teachers in developing school-based staff development programs</td>
<td>Professional educators in school environment</td>
<td>Interviews &amp; focus group sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good &amp; Brody (1997)</td>
<td>To determine ways teachers could become more active in the development of inservice programs at the school site level</td>
<td>Teachers at elem. &amp; secondary school sites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The qualitative research methodology employed in this study was used in order to document and to examine the experiences of Georgia elementary principals and school teams who applied and achieved the United States Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award over a three year time period. This study attempted to fill a gap in the research by concentrating on giving meaning to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of those actively involved in the Blue Ribbon Schools process. This chapter included a discussion of research tools, the selection of subjects, instrumentation, and the process used for statistical data analysis.

Research Questions

This study sought descriptive information regarding the following overarching question: What are the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and principals regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status? Seven major questions were generated to guide this research:

1) What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue Ribbon status?

2) What role do teachers and principals play in the Blue Ribbon implementation process?
3) What aspects of the Blue Ribbon Schools process do teachers and principals believe had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and self-assessment at the school site level?

4) To what extent did collaboration and shared values contribute to the Blue Ribbon Schools process?

5) What are the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding professional growth and development?

6) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership?

7) How does the Blue Ribbon Schools process involve all relevant stakeholders?

Participants

The researcher identified seven elementary schools in Georgia as primary units of study from the United States Department of Education’s website. All had received the nationally acclaimed Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award since the advent of the Blue Ribbon Schools Program in 1982. However, the academic years 2000-2003 were identified as the parameters of study. The researcher was interested in seeking fresh recollections from interviewees who had recently engaged in the Blue Ribbon Schools process at the elementary grades. This diverse sample came to include two suburban elementary schools, one urban elementary school, three suburban/rural elementary schools, and one rural elementary school. All of the schools were located in a geographic area that was logistically convenient to the researcher. Pseudonyms were substituted for the names of the schools and the participants to maintain confidentiality. The schools were described in terms of their public status, award year, grade level configuration,
setting, size, percentage of students coming from low-income homes, and distinguishing features.

Research Design and Procedures

Two methods for data collection were the qualitative research techniques termed the semi-structured interview method and the focus group (Seidman, 1991). In addition, quantitative data was collected through the use of a demographic questionnaire to obtain a profile of the participants in the study. After the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board granted approval to conduct the study (Appendix A), a cover letter (Appendix B) was mailed to each district’s superintendent requesting permission to conduct a study at selected elementary schools. Immediately following approval from the Superintendent of Schools, letters were forwarded to each principal of the Blue Ribbon School, requesting their permission to participate in the study. The research protocol questions were attached as was the Informed Consent Letter explaining the purpose of the study, participants needed, time required, benefits, confidentiality rights, and major contacts should concerns arise. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) explained that in discussions of the rights of research participants, privacy is generally the foremost concern. Respondents have a right to expect that the researcher will protect their anonymity and confidences totally.

After permission was granted by each principal, the researcher contacted them by telephone to set up a convenient time and place to conduct the interviews. Each 60-90 minute interview with both the principals and school teams was tape recorded. Before leaving the location of the interview, the tape recording was reviewed to insure the interview record had acceptable quality for accurate transcription. According to Seidman
(1991), “At the root of in-depth interviewing, is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning that they make of that experience” (p. 3). The intent of the researcher was to gather descriptive information regarding the perceptions and beliefs of principals and collaborative school teams regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status. The nature of the phenomenon being studied was well-suited for a qualitative rather than quantitative research approach. Creswell (1994) stressed that the paradigms that undergird qualitative research be employed using the in-depth interview method to explore the perceptions and beliefs of the subjects rather than a quantitative method such as a survey. There were mutual, simultaneous shaping of factors, emerging designs that led to categorizations identified during the research process, and patterns developed in the process which led to an overall understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Additionally, verification, rather than the validity and reliability used in quantitative research, is the basic element of quality assurance when a qualitative method is being employed (Creswell, 1994). This research used the description of the semi-structured interview and the focus group format suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999) as the fundamental guideline for conducting the interviews:

Typically, qualitative interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s frames and structures through the responses. This, in fact, is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it. A degree of systematization in questioning may be necessary in, for example, a multi-site case study or when many participants are interviewed. (p. 108).
Each in-depth interview session lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Both the interviews and focus groups were held at the school site before, during, and after school hours. The participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C) prior to the actual taping of the interview. The researcher recorded each session and recorded observations in handwritten notes of body language, nonverbal reactions, tone, gestures, impressions and other nuances. The researcher had each interview transcribed for the purpose of analyzing the data. Telephone calls were made to the participants, if clarification was necessary.

Instrumentation

The demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) and the focus group questions were designed by the researcher after a thorough review of the literature. An Item Analysis (Table VII) was created as a means of insuring that the items included in the questionnaires were related to the extensive review of the literature and the study research questions. Additionally, the questionnaire was reviewed, modified, and approved by the methodologist at Georgia Southern University. Thus, the final version of the guides used for each of the interviews and focus group sessions were created. A postcard format letter, also designed by the researcher, was attached to the Informed Consent Letter providing participants with the researcher’s home address and telephone number, if additional concerns needed to be addressed.
### Table 7

**Qualitative Item Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Sub Research Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs and Perceptions</td>
<td>U.S. Dept of Ed. 1997; Marske, Fiester &amp; Mullens, 1997; DuFour &amp; Eaker, 1998</td>
<td>Over-arching question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivating Factors</td>
<td>Wallace, Engel &amp; Mooney, 1997; Saban, 1997; Marzke, Fiester &amp; Mullens, 1997; Wynne, 1998; Richard, 2000.</td>
<td>P-1 FG-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration &amp; Shared Values</td>
<td>Lambert, 1998; Bolman &amp; Deal, 1997; Welch, 1998; Fullan, 1996; Barth, 2000; Deal &amp; Peterson, 1998</td>
<td>P-4 FG-5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Growth and Development</td>
<td>Joyce &amp; Calhoun, 1996; Guskey, Development, 2000; Little, 1993; Hargreaves, 1997; DuFour &amp; Eaker, 1998; Sparks &amp; Hirsh, 1997</td>
<td>P-7 FG-5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Leadership</td>
<td>Serns, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Leithwood, 1999; Lyons, 1999; Murphy &amp; Louis, 1999; Elmore, 2000; ISLLC, 2001; Fullan, 2002</td>
<td>P-6 FG-7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Leadership Capacity</td>
<td>Kotter, 1996; Morgan, 1997; Sergiovanni, 2000; Peterson &amp; Deal, 1998; Hargreaves, 1997; DuFour &amp; Eaker, 1998</td>
<td>P-5 FG-9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze data for this research project. The data from the demographic questionnaire, which included the gender, race, highest degree earned, and total years experience in education was analyzed, computed, and reported in narrative and table form, thus providing a demographic profile of the participants in the study. The research project primarily employed qualitative data collection and data treatment techniques. Using the transcribed copies of the interviews and focus group sessions, the researcher sought to identify categories and find patterns in the responses of the interviewees. According to Patton (1990), “Sitting down to make sense of pages of interviews …. can be overwhelming. Just dealing with all those pieces of paper can seem like an impossible task” (p.146).

First, in order to analyze the in-depth interview data, the transcribed documents were formatted and then imported into the QSR NUD.IST 5 program. Each participant’s responses to the actual interview guide questions were carefully scrutinized, reviewed, and coded in text segments by the researcher for assembly into the category or categories of the question. Subsequent subcategories were then coded to explore commonalities or identify significant themes in the responses. The documents were also explored for common themes and patterns beyond the scope of the initial interview guide questions and for intersections of text segments to discover relationships among descriptive dimensions established by the researcher. A computer software program QSR NUD. IST 5 was used to code the raw data, categorize it, and analyze the results, thus making the data analysis process less formidable (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Analysis is the
process of ordering the data, organizing the content into patterns, categories, and basic
descriptive units (Patton, 1990). Patton suggests that the interpretation in qualitative
research is as important as the analysis of the data. Interpretation “involves attaching
meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for
relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions” (p. 144).

Summary

The study focused on the shared experiences of elementary principals and teachers
who participated and achieved the United States Department of Education Blue Ribbon
School of Excellence Award over a three year time period. What factors motivated them
to apply? Did they play an integral role in the implementation process? What aspects of
the process led team members to engage in strategic planning, reflection, and assessment?
In what ways did collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall process? What
were the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership? How did the Blue
Ribbon School process involve relevant stakeholders in their mission to achieve the Blue
Ribbon?

The method of discovery in this research project was a qualitative approach.
Demographic information was collected through the use of a questionnaire on seven
principals and 37 teachers in Georgia. The results of the demographic questionnaire were
tallied, computed and findings reported in both narrative and table format. Principals
were interviewed and teachers seen in focus groups. Each session was recorded,
transcribed, and cross-analyzed. The analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data
generated during this research project yielded common themes and patterns and
significant dimensions reflecting the shared experiences of these participants in the overall Blue Ribbon experience.
CHAPTER 4

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This study was designed to explore and examine the shared experiences of principals and collaborative school teams who participated in and successfully achieved the United States Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award at seven elementary schools in Georgia. The program guidelines required that schools competing for the Blue Ribbon provide evidence of a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students, whereby, making available a comprehensive framework of key criteria for school effectiveness that could serve as a basis for participatory self-assessment and planning in schools. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify commonalities, recurring themes, or significant dimensions of their shared experiences, so that aspiring schools might gain insight into the elements essential to facilitating and sustaining effective change and improvement in their respective schools.

The methods of discovery in this research project were both quantitative and qualitative. Demographic information was collected through the use of a questionnaire on the seven principals and 37 teachers who participated in the Blue Ribbon process. Personal and professional demographics, such as gender, race, highest degree earned, and total years experience in education were taken into consideration, as well as the size and type of school (urban, suburban, or rural). All interviews were held at their respective school sites before, during, and after regular school hours during the months of
November 2004 - February, 2005. Each respondent participating in the interview portion of the study read and signed the Informed Consent Letter (Appendix D), as did the researcher before the interviews were conducted. The participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential. The interview guide (Appendix E) used to conduct the interviews addressed the following areas: (a) motivation to apply, (b) primary role during implementation, (c) leadership, (d) promoting leadership capacity, (e) impact on strategic planning and reflective practice, (f) collaboration, (g) professional growth and development, (f) and stakeholder involvement.

Chapter IV describes the findings of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis of this study. The quantitative findings are reported in narrative form and tables are used to report the statistics. Additionally, the qualitative data from the interviewees were analyzed using the program QSR NUD.IST 5 to categorize and code the data to search for commonalities, recurring themes, and significant information from the interviewees’ answers, comments, and anecdotes.

Research Questions

The following overarching research question was addressed:

What are the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and principals regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status? Additionally, seven sub-questions were designed to explore the fundamental research question:

1) What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue Ribbon status?

2) What role do teachers and principals play in the Blue Ribbon implementation process?
3) What aspects of the Blue Ribbon Schools process do teachers and principals believe had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and self-assessment at the school site level?

4) To what extent do collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall Blue Ribbon School process?

5) What are the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding professional growth and development?

6) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership?

7) How does the Blue Ribbon School process involve all relevant stakeholders?

Research Design

The researcher employed a qualitative research design in an effort to derive meaning from the experiences and perceptions of school teams and principals at seven Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools in Georgia. This format assisted the researcher in listening to school teams and principals, in their familiar settings, describe how they understood the special worlds in which they lived and worked. Furthermore, this method was found to be effective, based on the premise that the perspective of others (principal and school teams) is much more meaningful, more explicit, and rich in experience and knowledge. Additionally, this approach was considered more valuable in drawing meaning from unique situations, particularly when studying innovation. The interview questions were based on themes that emerged from the review of literature regarding school improvement initiatives and change in schools (Appendix E). The researcher worked closely with the Supervising Committee Chair and methodologist to ensure that appropriate modifications were made to the protocol questions to support the research
study. This approach assisted the researcher in developing valid questions intended to serve as the basis from which to examine the theoretical constructs surrounding individual learning and reflection as related to and embedded in organizational learning in such cases as the Blue Ribbon Schools.

Respondents

The respondents were comprised of six White females who had earned a specialist degree. There was only one White male who served in this capacity who held a doctorate degree. These elementary principals had worked in the sample schools for an average of 12 years. The average experience in the field of education was 24 years. The seven schools in the study were represented by letters A-G. The principal respondents were given a number correlated to their home school. Principals were classified as P-1, P-2, P-3.

Table 8

Demographic Characteristics of Principals at Selected Blue Ribbon Schools (N=7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P-1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.D</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-2</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-3</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-4</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-5</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-7</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 depicts the demographic characteristics of teacher respondents at School A. The ethnic makeup of teachers revealed all White females with an average of 20 years
experience in education. Four of the five teachers had earned a Master’s Degree. One held a Bachelors Degree.

Table 9
Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School A (N=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the six teacher respondents at School B. These classroom teachers had served an average of 24 years of cumulative experience in the field of education. Five of the teacher respondents were White females and one was a Black female. Of the six teachers interviewed, four of them held a Master’s Degree, one held an Ed.S., and the highest degree held was a Doctorate.

Table 10
Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School B (N=6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11 depicts the six teacher respondents at School C. The ethnic makeup of teachers revealed three Whites and three Blacks. One teacher held an Ed.S., one teacher held a Bachelors Degree, while the remaining four held a Master’s Degree. The average years in education totaled 19 years.

Table 11

Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents at School C (N=6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-12</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-14</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-16</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Ed.S</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 depicts the teacher respondents at School D. Of the five teachers interviewed, three held Ed.S. Degrees and the remaining two held a Master’s Degree. All five were White females with an average of 17 years experience in education.

Table 12

Demographic Profile of the Teacher Respondents at School D (N=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13 depicts the five female teacher respondents at School E. Of the five teachers, three were White and the remaining two were Black. Four held a Master’s Degrees and one held a Bachelors Degree. The average number of years experience in education was 13 years.

Table 13
Demographic Profile of Teacher Respondents at School E (N=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 depicts the teacher respondents at School F. The demographic profile illustrates four White females and one Black female. The average years in education were 15. The highest degree held by three of the respondents was an Ed.S., and the remaining two held a Master’s Degree.

Table 14
Demographic Profile of Teacher Respondents at School F (N=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15 depicts the profile of teacher respondents interviewed at School G. There were a total of five teachers, one Black and four White. All of them were females. One held an Ed.S. Degree and the remaining four held Master’s Degrees. The group of teachers averaged 13 years of cumulative experience in the field of education.

Table 15

Demographic Profile of Teacher Respondents at School G (N=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Yrs. Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R-33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-37</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Elementary School Demographics

This demographic profile represents the seven participating Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools. The description of each site will further illuminate the contextual information to help the reader understand more fully the data presented (see Table 16).

School A is located in a rural area serving 1,056 students in grades K-5. The racial/ethnic composition of students consisted of 97% White, 1.5% Asian, 0.9% Black, and 0.6% Hispanic or Latino. The percentage of students eligible to receive free/reduced lunch was 3.5%.

School B is located in a rural setting, serving 433 students in grades PK-2. The racial/ethnic composition of students consisted of 49% White, 49% Black, 1% Hispanic,
and 1% Multi-Racial with 67% of the students qualifying for federally funded free and reduced lunch.

School C is located in a suburban/urban community serving 488 students in grades K-5. The racial make-up consisted of 74.1% White, 13.9% Black, 4.7% Hispanic, 4.7% Asian, and 2.6% Multi-Racial. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch was 9%.

School D is a Pre-K–5 suburban elementary school, serving 724 students. The racial/ethnic make-up consists of 86.7% White, 3.6% Black, 2.2% Hispanics, 4.9% Asian, and 2.6% Multi-Racial. The percentage of students eligible to receive free/reduced lunch was 2%.

School E is a K-5 school located in an affluent urban community with a student enrollment of 573 with a majority of the students being White at 73.5%, 14.6% Black, 8.9% Hispanic, 1.2% Asian, 0.2% American-Indian, and 1.6% Multi-Racial. The number of students eligible for free reduced lunch was 26%.

School F is a small, but innovative neighborhood school located in a suburban/urban community with a student population of 378 serving grades K-5. Entering its fourth year as a year round school, this school is one of three in its school district. The percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch was 88%. The racial make-up is 95% Black, 1% White, 2% Multi-Racial and 2% Hispanic.

School G is classified as a suburban school setting with characteristics typical of that in an urban setting. Serving students in grades K-5, school G has a total population of approximately 800 students. The racial/ethnic composition is comprised of 81.4% White, 6.0% Black, 2.0% Hispanic or Latino, 9.0% Asian, and 1.6% American Indian. Those
eligible for free/reduced priced meals were 2.0% of the school population, with a total of 16 students qualifying.

Table 16

Demographics of Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools in Georgia (N=7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Year of Award</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>PK-2</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>Suburban/Urban</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>Suburban/Urban</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>Suburban/Urban</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Data Analysis

Seven elementary principals agreed to be interviewed by responding affirmatively to the approved letter requesting participation. The researcher then contacted them by telephone to arrange interview appointments and to discuss the selection of participants to be interviewed in focus groups. The resulting schools included one suburban school, three suburban/urban schools, two rural, and one urban school. All of the principals were White. Six of them were female and one was a male. Of the seven, only one held a Doctorate Degree. One female principal was near completion of her Doctoral Degree and was scheduled to complete her study in early spring. The remaining principals held a
Specialist Degree. Their years of experience as elementary principals spanned from 10 to 33 years.

The qualitative research data resulting from the analysis of the interviews with principals and focus groups with teachers are presented to correspond with the research questions of the study. These are followed by a brief general discussion of the recurring themes or patterns, noteworthy or unusual responses, and especially, the insights as afforded through the interviewees’ own words concerning their shared perceptions and beliefs regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status. The data in the form of text selections corresponding to each research question are subdivided by the most prevalent topics and themes resulting from the data analysis. All of the respondents participating in the interviews were assured that their identities would remain confidential; therefore, the researcher made every effort to maintain the integrity of their responses and to capture the richness of these individuals “lived” experiences and perceptions in their own words by recording their own descriptions without disclosing their identities. Each teacher respondent was assigned a number, 1, 2, 3, etc. The principals were coded using the schools A-G, and responses represented by an assigned number throughout the findings of the qualitative data analysis. In addition, the researcher edited the contents by omitting any references to actual persons, actual school districts, geographic locations in Georgia, etc., with generic terms to insure the respondents’ anonymity. Passages were edited to avoid repetition or to circumvent comments that were not pertinent to the primary focus of the interview question by using (...) instead of the actual text of the transcripts. Words or phrases were inserted in brackets { } in order to avoid ambiguities for the reader.
Motivating Factors

Research Sub Question 1. What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue Ribbon status?

Continuous Improvement Opportunities. In the following text selections, the interviewees discussed the degree of motivation believed to have been influential in their decision to apply for the Blue Ribbon. The stories revealed striking similarities across school sites. While some responses varied among the interviewees, the descriptions reflected the most salient aspects of a collaborative school community, with a shared understanding of the purposes, rationale and processes of school innovation as a requirement for school learning. Several respondents reported that having time for stimulating interaction among teachers was important to them. One teacher shared the following:

By having the opportunity to interact with my peers, I feel as though I have learned so much more. The Blue Ribbon process afforded me the opportunity to meet with my colleagues, to learn more about innovative strategies that I could use in my classroom, and has reinforced the idea that there is always something new to learn. It makes the whole experience of coming together much more invigorating. It has furthermore provided me with a vehicle for sharing ideas and reflecting critically on my own classroom practices. Although I have been teaching for over a decade, I am always eager to learn more, to gain a much broader knowledge base . . . And consequently, the overall process has enabled all of us to expand our capabilities, which I believe is essential to sustained school improvement. (R-5, School A, p. 8 ).

Several teachers at another school further indicated:

Having an opportunity to engage in continuous learning activities at our school has helped us to develop higher quality solutions to problems. Meeting with others has actually helped to foster an increase in the likelihood of ownership in the decisions made, and, thus, has provided us with an avenue to expand our pool of ideas. The ongoing encouragement and moral support for one another has also been beneficial. (R-17, School C, p.25).

Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements if you want to work here at this school. Teachers here are supported and the trust we have for one
another has occurred as a result of the warm, close, collegial relationships that have been established over time. We tolerate (even encourage) debate, discussion and disagreement and we have become more comfortable in sharing both our successes and failures with each other. It becomes rather emotional at times, but we make it a habit to praise and recognize one another’s triumphs, and offer empathy and support for each other during troubled times. (R- 20, School D, p.33).

The Blue Ribbon process was indeed a great learning and motivating experience. Although this opportunity demanded a great deal of time, flexibility, organization, and energy, it has enabled the teams here at the school to learn and trust each other’s perspective. Furthermore, I believe that engaging in such a process created a sense of common cause and a growing appreciation for each others knowledge and expertise. It has also provided us with a sense of community. (R- 26, School E, p.44).

In all cases, teachers viewed collaborative planning and opportunities to engage in decision-making and problem-solving as a crucial component to create the appropriate learning environment in which students with diverse needs could maximize their learning potential. They furthermore believed that collaboration provided them with a vehicle for sharing ideas, taking risks in the classroom and reflecting critically on their classroom practices. An overwhelming majority of the teachers and principals spoke favorably of how continuous learning at their schools had helped to build a higher level of morale, had encouraged innovation, and more importantly, increased efficacy both collectively and individually. This Blue Ribbon process furthermore created a climate of shared understandings, values, and norms, allowing teachers to improve the quality of their teaching practices by working together on unit plans, lessons and assessments. The elementary principal at School A explained:

Teachers feel excited about what the children are linking together. They’re beginning to express concerns such as, ‘What will happen to our children after they leave here?’ . . . ‘What more can we do to ensure they have mastered skill objectives?’ . . . . The teachers want our children to continue to love reading. They don’t want to see their vision and hard work die . . . . They are relentless about asking how to make change happen so that good things will continue to happen for
our children. It’s always amazing to see the wonderful activities these teachers have planned for them. (P-1, School A, p.3).

A principal expressed the importance of trust and communication while working on the Blue Ribbon application:

When our staff agreed to work towards achieving the Georgia School of Excellence a few years ago, I realized then that this task would involve a great deal of cooperation, trust, and communication. As a leader, I strongly believe it is crucial that I set the tone for improvement by modeling active learning, by investing time in the process, by showing respect for the ideas of others, and by empowering my teachers. I support what my teachers are doing. I am always inviting them into the decision-making process. I believe in building the leadership capacity at my school . . . . My goodness, I could not even attempt to fill all or even most of the roles as principal. I have a cadre of teachers that are quite reliable and committed. Together, we learn. In this way, we are able to improve collectively in ways that lead to improved student achievement. (P-2, School B, p.16).

Recognition and Accomplishment. Several respondents also referred to the Blue Ribbon experience as a way to foster the sharing of good ideas and best practices. Recognition was viewed by teachers and principals as a powerful energizer for further improvement, as well as a stimulus for continued efforts at the site level. Several Blue Ribbon respondents felt that while the Blue Ribbon process may not have suggested the need for new efforts or adaptation, it did reinforce the importance of school changes already underway. School teams reported that recognition resulted in higher local funding for the school, greater parent and community involvement, and higher levels of success in the attainment of additional resources for the school.

The overall Blue Ribbon process enhanced teamwork, teacher collegiality, and promoted a goal-oriented focus that brought about an increased sense of pride within these schools. Whether the process exclusively caused the teamwork, collegiality and goal-oriented focus was a matter of conjecture, however, evidence clearly suggested that at least some measure of these attributes had to have been in existence at the schools prior
to the initiation of the application in order for it to have been successfully received. In any event, affective benefits appeared to outweigh the concrete. The following school personnel revealed their thoughts and expressions of joy as a result of receiving national recognition:

I have been a principal at three different schools. I realized early on that this was a very special staff, a hard-working staff, a staff committed to academic excellence. We had all endured a lot of growing pains during the years just prior to applying for the Georgia School of Excellence Award. I felt it was time that my teachers needed to be recognized for the extraordinary work that they do. There was no documentation available to illustrate what a great job they were doing. Having already received the Georgia School of Excellence Award made it clear that we were already a model school. It then became obvious that the very next step was to apply for the Blue Ribbon. (P-1, School A, p.1).

Everyone felt that applying for the Blue Ribbon would help to validate the extraordinary work of teachers. This award would truly serve as recognition for all the hard work put forth by our entire school community. After receiving the Georgia School of Excellence Award, we felt we were well on our way. (P-2, School B, p. 8).

We truly enjoy the family atmosphere that exists here at our school. We are extremely proud of the concerted efforts being made to ensure all students are successful. We want others to know that in spite of the odds, all children can learn regardless of their socioeconomic levels. It was our belief that all children can be inspired and motivated to perform at extraordinary levels. We further believe our children can achieve higher goals if everyone on the team is willing to go the extra mile. I must admit, however, that it was our principal who came to us and said, “Let’s apply for the Blue Ribbon.” It was a unanimous decision. Immediately following this decision was when our principal took the initiative in forming steering committees comprised of people who she felt could work well together to get the job done. (R-6, School B, pp. 10-11).

Our principal had been doing so many extraordinary things here at our school. I am not sure how it was presented, but I do recall, however, that we were seated in a faculty meeting one afternoon and the principal stated, “Someone needs to know what we do here at our school. It seems obvious that we should apply for the Blue Ribbon. If we get it, fine, or if we don’t, that’s fine too.” Everyone felt it would be a great opportunity to apply for the Blue Ribbon. It would help to validate what was already occurring, but also would afford us an opportunity to highlight all the remarkable activities that were already taking place in our school community. (R-23, School E, p.35).
I was actually involved in helping our school to achieve the Georgia School of Excellence. I was the chairperson of the leadership team that managed to pull it all together. I had worked in many schools but when I became a teacher here, I felt I had died and gone to heaven. I felt strongly about going for the Blue Ribbon and felt this was something that could be achieved, if we all worked together to make it happen. (R-13, School C, p. 24).

School-wide celebratory events gave birth to the stories as principals and school teams re-lived the process. Most of them referred to the process as a bonding experience for the entire school. Interviewees reported that the exuberance of success extended far beyond those who had worked on the Blue Ribbon application. Moreover, the process, according to many, had served as a valid assessment tool that ultimately led to greater participation in a network of school people who shared a common philosophy that had greatly strengthened the school’s effort to improve student learning.

No Child Left Behind Legislation

Of the seven schools to receive the Blue Ribbon, only two principals spoke of how the criteria had changed. One principal reported that their school did not apply for the Blue Ribbon. Their school was selected because they had demonstrated dramatic improvement in the areas of reading and mathematics instruction. Over 40% of the student population was from disadvantaged backgrounds and they had made remarkable strides. It was further reported that according to new legislation, ‘The No Child Left Behind Act,’ the Blue Ribbon School Program was now recognizing schools that had shown dramatic improvement as defined by the state, based on the new state accountability system. Schools that had made the greatest gains {top 10%} in student achievement as measured by state assessments were eligible and subsequently were recognized by the State Department for nomination. Contained in the texts that follow are descriptions of what subsequently occurred:
I received a telephone call informing us that our school had been nominated for the Georgia Blue Ribbon. We did not apply. The only paperwork that was needed was the application. The State Department simply wanted us to document the steps we implemented at the school level demonstrating how our students were able to perform at high levels. We were all excited because our school had received numerous awards each year. The year before, our school had received the National Title I Distinguished Award. We were also applying for the Pay for Performance Award. We were also being recognized as one of two schools in our district to make AYP for six years in a row. So much was happening at one time. Needless to say, we knew we were doing a great job, but to gain national recognition would put the icing on the cake by clearly validating all that we had worked so hard for. (P-6, School F, pp. 46-47).

Another principal conveyed similar feelings:

In our county, you have to be nominated by the central office. At the time, there were several elementary schools making significant progress; however, only one elementary school could be nominated. One year just prior, our school received the U. S. Professional Development Award that was truly an honor. The district office had the spotlight on our school to move forward and apply, so subsequently, we completed the application and weeks later we received word that we had won the award. It was simply a matter of completing the application and documenting all the strategies and interventions that were being implemented at the school site level to ensure that every child was successful. It was a tedious process, but it was well worth the effort. It was truly a great experience and everyone felt inspired that our school had been chosen. (P-4, School D, p. 28.)

Critical Role

Research Sub Question 2. What role did teachers and principals play in the Blue Ribbon implementation process?

Reflective Practitioner

Teachers and principals at all seven elementary schools expressed how reflection and critical inquiry had become the cornerstone for their success in achieving the Blue Ribbon. An overwhelming majority of the respondents spoke favorably about having the opportunity to meet with one another to discuss the practice of teaching, the curriculum, and innovative strategies designed to improve instruction. Unanimous in their support of the team concept approach, several teachers at one school expressed how they looked
forward to meeting with one another to engage in meaningful discussion. They further spoke of the camaraderie that existed through the sharing of ideas, the discussion of lessons together as they reviewed and discussed students’ work. On the other hand, several teachers referred to the arduous task of completing the application as tedious, but were appreciative of the devoted time they spent to create what they could not have managed to do alone. The positive effects, as noted by several teachers, had extended beyond the classroom and had flourished throughout the whole school community. The principal at School D revealed how this particular aspect had become an essential component of her daily work as an administrator.

Being a principal at an elementary school is an exciting job. No day is ever the same. As I see it . . . you have to orchestrate everything that goes on in the school. All of the pieces must come together. You have to be willing to step back and reassess your role as a leader. Sometimes I think that means just getting out of the way so teachers can do the great things they need to do for kids. As principal of this school, I have a vision. I know where I want this school to go. I believe it’s important that you know your staff, your kids, and most importantly, your community. When you are able to bring these people together for a common good, with a common focus, you are then able to promote student academic achievement. I believe as a leader, it is my responsibility to know what goes on in my building. I have high expectations for myself and for my staff. Therefore, I find myself constantly reminding teachers about what matters the most and that data is what drives the instructional program. I am always observing and making sure that they are fulfilling those obligations as outlined by the state and also by the county. I also feel that it’s important to be a model learner yourself so I get in there and learn right along with them. We participate in staff development sessions together. On occasions, I may present and often times, it is the instructional team, the assistant principal or master teachers. We have also invited individuals from outside the school system to facilitate sessions. Teachers here enjoy this time together. As the instructional leader, I believe it’s important that we work as a team. I don’t feel I need to be the one making all the decisions. I have established a building leadership team. We are constantly looking at data in an effort to make informed decisions regarding our instructional program. Our existing school improvement plan has been the product of this approach. This plan has become the fundamental roadmap to where we would like to be. Therefore, our staff development plan is closely aligned with our school improvement goals and often times, the staff development sessions are coordinated right here at the school. The presentations are usually conducted by the teachers. In this way, they are able to deliver information that is relative to the curriculum. It becomes more meaningful,
and teachers are able to apply the skills directly into their classrooms. I truly believe this process has had such a profound impact on the degree of professional learning that has taken place over the years. (P-4, School D, p. 27-28)

It came as no surprise when several teachers repeatedly referred to their principal as the leading learner at their school. They spoke favorably of their principal as an individual who modeled lifelong learning and facilitated the learning of all its members at the school. Several teachers at other schools further elaborated on how their principal promoted interrelationships, connectedness, and advocated the sharing of best practices across grade levels. This was accomplished using interdisciplinary teams, action research, and school councils that also served as a vehicle for ongoing critical reflection and collaboration.

Within this framework, teacher respondents at all seven schools acknowledged that this process had expanded their repertoire of classroom skills and strategies, and provoked a deeper, broader, and richer understanding of what they did as educators. More importantly, they emphasized how being a reflective practitioner had placed them in a position of recognizing and appreciating the diverse talents and strengths of other team members within their own schools.

**Active Learner**

Another role that teachers and principals emphasized as a critical component throughout the Blue Ribbon process was that of an active learner. Several pointed out that as members of a team of professionals, they must be willing to take on additional responsibilities, and engage in professional development opportunities often, so they were would be able to address the challenges they face at the school. Also evident from the discussions with several teams, was that they held themselves accountable to students,
to parents, to the community, and to one another. The principal at one school viewed his professional staff as a resource for school improvement and took steps to increase the leadership capacity at his school. He further stressed how organizational structures were designed to support teachers in their collaborative planning and learning together. There was time provided to teachers on a regular basis, and in sufficient quantity, allowing them adequate opportunities to discuss pertinent issues in both breadth and depth to engage in meaningful and shared learning. The organizational and physical structures that supported teacher collaboration and learning varied. Grade-level meetings allowed teachers to plan instructional activities together and to discuss common issues. Teachers also met in cross-grade teams to collaborate within discipline areas, for example to discuss curriculum and instructional concerns. At one school, “design teams” or “action teams” were authorized to make school decisions on behalf of the total staff. Because time was allocated to these activities, teachers had regular and ongoing opportunities to problem-solve around critical issues, and were afforded the opportunity to engage in whole-staff learning and reflection about their work. At each school, teachers commented positively on how they appreciated the time given to be used in productive and meaningful ways. Several teachers shared the following regarding the significance of being an active learner:

I can remember when we initially started to complete the application. We were assigned to groups. Everyone had a part to play and everyone participated. We became a close-knit family. We became much closer because we were finding out new and exciting things about each other. It was truly a learning experience. Our principal was the catalyst in making sure there were opportunities to learn. I must admit that when I first came to this school, I was so computer illiterate. There were so many learning opportunities available that I soon began to realize that unless we were willing to open up and avail ourselves to new and exciting possibilities, we would not be able to help our students. The professional training helped tremendously. There have been a lot of opportunities here at this school. I believe
professional learning has truly helped our faculty to grow in many ways. (R-5, School A, p. 3).

There are a few teachers here on staff constantly trying to keep things stirred up in a negative manner. . . . They try to bring the morale down. We do not need that. I believe we need to accept what is. I believe together we can make our school a pleasant place. We need to always put children first and do what is in their best interest. I believe we are smarter together than we are apart. I would like to think we are true players at heart. Working together, seeking a common understanding allows us to better our craft and refine our practice as educators. Let’s face it; we are all living in a world that demands mutual dependence. You’ll find this in industry, the business world, in the political arena, and with most families as they seek to resolve problems in the home. So it seems natural for all of us here to continuously come together as a professional family to discuss what matters the most, which is to improve student learning. (R-10, School B, p. 17).

I am always teasing our principal about having a soft touch. Whenever teachers would go to him regarding a need for staff development, he was always willing to find the money to support what we were trying to achieve. Our principal has always supported us. He has always found ways to make things happen. (R-6, School A, p. 4).

There is an enormous amount of team spirit and active learning here at our school. We work extremely well together. We support each other and are always willing to learn new and exciting methods to motivate our students. We also realize how important it is to give each other a pat on the back every now and then. I like to think of us as one large extended family. I truly believe it is the teamwork and the care that we have for one another that makes the difference. Working together on the Blue Ribbon application was indeed a learning experience. We discovered an awful lot about ourselves and our school. The long hours in preparing the application enabled us to reflect on our purpose while making the best possible decisions for our students. It was amazing. Every teacher rose to the expectation. Hard work was the norm, where teachers regularly committed long hours to planning, both independently and collaboratively (R-8, School B, p. 13).

Impact

Research Sub Question 3. What aspects of the Blue Ribbon process do teachers and principals believe had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and self-assessment at the school site level?
Self-renewal and discovery

In all cases, the Blue Ribbon process encouraged an integrated, holistic view of the school, particularly for team members who actively participated in preparing the nomination packet. The application process generally refocused school administrators and participating staff on the school’s larger mission and priorities, and promoted work toward common goals. Participants consistently identified the importance of organizational reflection and the power of synergy on organizational development. To many, self-renewal and discovery were viewed as an integral parts of the teaming process. Some, however, associated renewal and discovery with personal goals. However, a majority of the respondents cited that the goal used in this process provided a measuring stick against which to determine progress. Overall, the responses concerning the impact of strategic planning, reflection, and assessment were quite similar.

Teachers spoke with enthusiasm about having the opportunity to meet with colleagues to discuss teaching techniques and student activities. They indicated how their principal had scheduled the workday so that they were able to work collaboratively with other staff members on lesson planning, curriculum issues, and program development. They further described the composition of work teams, comprised of a broad cross-section of staff, designed to solve organizational problems, and improve student learning. Teachers at a majority of the schools commended their principal for affording them the opportunity to meet with other staff members at their grade level to discuss pertinent issues. Reflection was characterized by work done in teams. At many of the schools, it became obvious to the researcher that this process had contributed greatly to a stronger, better-functioning staff. Teachers found solutions to learning and
had worked together towards a common goal. Several teachers referred to the overall process as a way to improve on what they were already doing.

Several of the respondents recalled how the overall Blue Ribbon experience had enabled them to recapture why they had all chosen to do the work that they do. One of the teachers explained that she and several other teachers at her school had been around for such a long time, and were accustomed to going the extra mile for students. Going through this process, she further explained, simply validated why their school was already successful. Others described the experience as a school improvement strategy, where teachers became more committed, more energized, and more responsible for making the best possible decisions for students. Additionally, teams felt this was a productive way to address specific areas in the most productive manner.

We would look at the various parts of the application and determine which areas could be addressed by teachers who were most knowledgeable. In this way, we were able to tackle those parts that were most difficult and complete areas in the most efficient manner. It soon became a patchwork affair in which everyone involved became a major contributor. (R-5, School A, p. 5).

The overall process gave us an opportunity to see things from a different perspective. By going through this process, we were able to look closer at what was already occurring, the good things . . . . It came as no surprise when we discovered that we were right on track in terms of strategies that we were implementing at the school level (R-8, School B, p. 9).

As I worked with others on the Blue Ribbon application, I soon realized that anything is possible if you’re willing to work together and plan together. Everyone became closer over the weeks as we all strived towards one common goal, that being the Blue Ribbon. We were able to encourage one another and brainstorm on areas that needed to be addressed. We were able to reveal so much together, most of which we knew already. The overall process and the work involved made it all worthwhile, especially when we were able to see what was already occurring in print. (R-6, School B, p. 10).

Working towards the Blue Ribbon was not just an opportunity to gain national recognition. Instead, it was an opportunity to develop goals for long term
improvements. For me, the process became a cycle for continuous inquiry and improvement (R-29, School G, p.58).

Participatory Leadership

In all cases, respondents were in agreement in their beliefs on how participatory leadership was a critical component in bringing about productive changes at their school. The school improvement process required that individuals from all stakeholder groups come together, work together-collegially and collaboratively-in teams, and that everyone’s suggestions and ideas were valued, as expressed by one teacher.

“We believe teams should be the basic unit of performance, however, there were times when a situation required an enormous amount of time to resolve. That was when we realized that a team inevitably gets better results than a collection of individuals operating within confined job roles and responsibilities.” (R-35, School G. p.58).

Throughout the Blue Ribbon process, team members were encouraged to meet and work collaboratively. This approach was successful in bringing the same satisfaction, gratification, and rewards—not only to the team members, but to the overall process as well. This aspect also encouraged teachers to share mutual interests and goals together.

One of the most noticeable benefits of participatory leadership as noted by many interviewees was that it had encouraged risk taking behaviors amongst team members but also created an atmosphere in which everyone felt valued. The advantages to this approach throughout the process outweighed the disadvantages sufficiently. All the teachers in the study stated how very committed they were to continuing this approach. They also stated that when collective dialogue takes place on a regular basis, when all the members on the team are working towards a common goal and not interested in who gets the credit, it increases the likelihood that the time spent will indeed have a positive effect on improving learning.
Collaboration and Shared Values

Research Sub Question 4. To what extent did collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall Blue Ribbon School process?

Shared Accountability

Administrators and team members believed that by working together in a goal-oriented process such as one found in the Blue Ribbon School program, they were able to glean a broader, more meaningful view of their schools. The Blue Ribbon Schools process caused many schools to re-examine their missions and priorities. Principals repeatedly verbalized a child-centered orientation and maintained that this focus was integral to the mission at each school. Team members agreed that a student focus was the driving force of the school’s aims and actions. They furthermore emphasized the shared accountability system that was in place, enabling teams to work collaboratively to develop higher quality solutions to problems that fostered an increase in the likelihood of ownership in the decisions made at the school level. The notion of shared accountability had become embedded in the daily work life of teachers.

At many of the schools, it was noted that time had been built into the school day so that teachers had a regularly scheduled time for learning together. Adequate training and support, as stated by many was important to them. This aspect appeared prevalent in many of the schools as staff members discussed how they would take the initiative and responsibility to work together. It soon became evident to the researcher from the interview portion of this study that these individuals had reached consensus regarding the aims and values of the school and reflected a sense of community, a unity of purpose, and ownership through collegiality and collaboration. It was furthermore discovered through
conversations with the various school teams that quality teaching was at the heart of their efforts.

All of the teachers and principals expressed at one point how high standards were set to challenge and monitor student progress, how students were encouraged to use their creative imagination and powers of problem solving and how their school made maximum use of instructional time by placing a strong emphasis on mastery of basic skills and the development of an achievement orientation. Teams often spoke of the importance of supportive relations and the need for cooperation between the home and school. They strongly emphasized the need and development of home-school partnerships as a critical component to the overall success of their schools. They further believed that parents as partners must be willing to buy into the concept of shared accountability in an effort to produce the desired results.

Unity of Purpose. Teams from each school site reported that organizational structures existed to support them in their collaborative planning and learning together. They further stressed that a spirit of professional respect and trust had motivated them to work more collaboratively on school work. They understood the importance of ongoing communication and valued the exchange with each other. The professional trust and respect that pervaded the school strengthened the staff’s unquestioned commitment to school improvement initiatives and allowed teachers to take risks in implementing new strategies. A majority of the respondents repeatedly stressed that their school was able to win the Blue Ribbon designation because of a shared sense of propose that permeated the faculty, students, parents, and the community.
Professional Growth and Development

Research Sub Question 5. What are the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding professional growth and development?

Improved Practice

Discussion and debate surrounding professional growth and development grew in consensus in regards to the guiding principles for teacher learning. Inherent in these principles as expressed by most of the teachers and principals was the notion that professional development should include ongoing professional learning tied to the curriculum, assessment, and student performance. Most teachers, however, found it to be most beneficial when it was integrated into the regular school schedule, making it relevant to improved practice and student learning. To a large extent, most teachers described professional development activities as a sense of moral obligation, as well as a commitment to personal, professional and organizational learning. One teacher revealed:

Our district demonstrates a strong commitment to ongoing learning, both among the staff, and within the school. Our county establishes several staff development days which are scheduled throughout the academic school year. There is a whole day in October and four half days built into the calendar year. In this way, teachers are able to acquire a minimum of 20 hours per school year. In addition, the system offers staff development opportunities for teachers and paraprofessionals interested in becoming more proficient in certain areas. (R-13, School C. p. 23).

Several principals reported that professional development was about the sharing of ideas and best practices. They further emphasized that the best forms of staff development were those that were well-planned, goal-oriented, and included the time element necessary to conduct follow-up activities. Several models were used by both the principals and school teams. These included study groups that were an effective way for schools to engage in finding acceptable solutions to common problems. Study groups
also provided opportunities for staff members to work together, which succeeded in bringing a closer focus to ongoing school improvement efforts. It furthermore paved the way for professional learning communities to flourish. Action research was another model often used by teams at the school level. This particular model served as a way for individual teachers to become more involved in collecting, analyzing, and reviewing data, while taking action on relevant issues and documenting results. Several teachers spoke of mentoring as a professional development model. This method involved pairing a highly seasoned teacher with a novice one. This model, as expressed by several teachers, helped to form life-long, productive professional relationships. Professional development was therefore viewed by a majority as a continuous improvement endeavor that had become an integral part of their lives as educators. It was furthermore considered a shared responsibility with a primary focus on improved student learning. As one teacher explained:

I was selected to be the staff development liaison for our school. I am always working to provide sessions that are much more meaningful and beneficial for the teachers. One that I thoroughly enjoy is the one sponsored by the Atlanta Journal Constitution. They deliver newspapers to the schools so that we are able to utilize them with the students. As the liaison, I am primary responsible for attending classes one day a month. I am always looking at professional development opportunities that will some way have an impact on improved student learning. With the assistance of our Title I grant, we are able to provide not only the materials, but are able to send teachers to workshops all the time. (R-31, School F, p. 57).

Our principal encourages us to pursue professional development opportunities. She supports us when we inquire about conferences that we would like to attend. She believes in helping us to grow and develop as professional and is constantly pushing us to pursue our goals. (R-33, School F, p. 57).

From the conversations with several teachers, professional development was a priority in their school districts. Many opportunities were provided for teachers to continually update their skills and develop new areas of expertise. The majority of
teachers surveyed agreed that professional development experiences sponsored by their
districts or their schools provided opportunities to work productively with colleagues,
helped school staff work together better, and altered approaches to teaching in the
schools. One veteran teacher shared:

We have a certain number of days to use for professional development. I’ve never
been told that I could not attend something. My principal encourages us to attend
workshops. When we return to our school sites, we are generally required to share
what we’ve learned with other staff members. (R-30, School G, p. 61).

Another teacher stated:

Professional development here is based on individual choice as well as district-wide
best-practices. The district is making us very much aware that professional learning
is a priority. The district office has provided special funds aimed at school-based
staff development needs. Our school usually decides based on a needs assessment
inventory. In this way, teachers and teams are able to decide which training would
be most beneficial in terms of school-wide needs. (R-34, School G, p. 65).

One teacher expressed an opposing point of view:

I don’t think we always need to be jumping on the bandwagon developing for the
whole staff the next thing that comes down the pike and throwing the baby out with
the bath water. Right now, I think we’re so caught up in so many other things, that
we don’t have adequate time to reflect and use all that we’ve been given. It’s not
that I’m against learning something new. It appears that whenever a new
instructional model comes along with a new label, everyone feels the urge to sign up
for the course. To me, the same strategies that worked 10 years ago are still working.
(R-35, School G, p. 66).

Organizational Learning

Most interviewees felt that the best place for teachers’ professional growth was in the
school itself. Most staff members referred to themselves as life-long learners. They
further stated that their school was a place for ongoing learning practices and that a site-
based management team had been established to adequately assess the needs of the
school community. Subsequently, action plans were developed and a matrix designed illustrating potential training opportunities and the key players needed to assist.

Professional development opportunities were generally held on site and favorably received by an overwhelming majority. Professional development was not viewed as a task to be completed, but as ongoing work of life-long learners. There were both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influenced why teachers engaged in various activities, however, the opportunities to conduct them on site have increased commitment and the competence of teachers tremendously. Teachers expressed with much delight and satisfaction how humbled they were to be at a school that promoted and developed a community of learners.

Principal Leadership

Research Sub Question 6. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership?

Visionary

An overwhelming majority of the teachers interviewed referred to their principals as skilled team-builders, instructional leaders and visionary risk-takers. They further stated that their principals exhibited a sense of integrity, embraced responsibility, and were open to taking on new roles. Teachers at several schools defined principal leadership as the ability to get all members of their school to perform the task required to achieve the organization’s goals and objectives. In others words, the art of successful principal leadership was liberating people to do what was required of them in the most effective and humane way possible. One teacher admired everything about her principal and firmly expressed why she felt that way:
My principal recognizes our potential and does her best to treat each of us as professionals and gives us the wings to soar to heights that we never thought imaginable. She creates an atmosphere in which “learning for all” is paramount. Our principal understands that people are more important than things. She never loses sight of the most important principle governing human beings. Her genuine smile, and stern demeanor may appear intimidating to some, but everyone admires her stamina. (R-23, School D, p. 39).

Another team shared:

Our principal demands nothing but the best from all of us. She is constantly enabling us to achieve our personal best. She furthermore sets high but realistic performance goals and often will find those subtle ways to improve operations and procedures, striving for quality every time. (R-22, School D, p. 40).

An overwhelming majority of teachers from one school described their principal as one who leads through a shared set of lens, guiding and leading them together. It was also noted that their principal often provided opportunities for staff to learn together, to have fun together, and to work together, while developing the people capacities at the school level. A team of teachers at another school cited the following:

Our principal is very observant and intuitive. Because she is visible at all times, she can feel when the air is tense. She is always concerned about the climate of the school and can easily tell when morale is starting to decline, particularly during certain times of the year. . . .Whether people feel valued and supported versus used and neglected, makes a great deal of difference in the climate (R-27, School E, p. 43).

When issues such as empowerment and shared decision making were mentioned, several teachers quickly noted that their principal acted as a facilitator and was an excellent resource person who was never afraid to share with teachers the power for making their school a more effective one. They also contended that when situations escalated, their principal did what was necessary to influence positive working relationships between certain groups of teachers who sometimes were resistant to new ideas. What was more amazing throughout the discussion was that most teachers agreed
unanimously that their principal was not afraid to admit when he/she did not have the answer. When asked specifically, what they admired the most about their principal, several teachers revealed that they admired how they provided conditions and resources to support them in their continuous learning endeavors.

One teacher who had been at the same school her entire career shared:

Those who have been here for a period of time had witnessed so many changes occur over the years. We had not always had this kind of leadership. He has really been our anchor. We were so caught up in adjusting to change year after year that when he came, he gave us a chance to truly discover why it was necessary and gave us a chance to sit back and adjust. Our principal is truly a leader who believes that teachers are leaders and true professionals in their field. He believes our opinions matter. He further believes in giving us every opportunity to engage in professional growth and development. Our principal strongly encourages teachers to identify and try new things that we feel might be beneficial to the students. When this occurs, teachers feel no threat of failing because he is always providing full support. He is always looking at the big picture. (R-5, School A, p. 4).

It was evident through the discussions with teachers that principals were viewed as collaborators. Many felt that shared leadership was an embedded practice that was appreciated by all in their school community. This concept suggested that there was a shared responsibility for a shared purpose that created a greater potential for long-term sustainability of reform.

**Mentor.** A dominant characteristic trait shared by several teacher respondents was how principals often shared professional knowledge with them, enabling them to set goals and inspiring them to reach those goals. One teacher pointed out:

Our principal often paves the way for us to learn and become better teachers. She shares the decision making process with us on substantive issues and regards each of us as leaders in many of the school improvement efforts. She furthermore provides the time, the resources, and the structures necessary to make sure that each team is working together effectively, by giving us the tools to strategize and identify areas for improvement. (Respondent 35, School G, p.65).
It was considered important to them that the principal modeled expected behaviors, maintained consistency, and was open to the feelings of others, and not being insensitive in the name of getting the job done. A number of teacher respondents emphasized the importance of effective leadership in helping others to achieve their personal best. Additionally, they were admired for setting high, but realistic goals, were able to master a wide range of skills, and inspired others to achieve excellence. While some referred to their principals as visionary risk-takers, always willing to find creative solutions to challenging problems, others referred to them as conceptual thinkers, capable of mobilizing the energy and capacity of teachers.

**Instructional Leader.** Teachers often referred to the principal as an effective instructional leader who in the eyes of many was considered both a problem solver and resource provider. As such, they were able to facilitate the teaching and learning process by resolving conflicts, devising plans and policies, and able to obtain resources to address potential problems. They were noted for utilizing both formal and informal means to gain power within the organization and resources to enhance teaching and learning. A majority emphasized how principals supported the ongoing development of teaching and learning throughout their careers by following current trends and issues, encouraging them to attend workshops, seminars, and conferences. One teacher stated that her principal has always promoted a culture of collaboration and learning throughout the school in a variety of forms: peer coaching, action teams, study groups, team level meetings. Our principal furthermore uses data to drive instruction. She further acknowledged:

> Our principal believes that disaggregating student performance indicators is a very useful way to frame the “learning for all” problems facing our school. By using data
to identify the root causes of the achievement problems here at the school, we are better able to address issues related to school improvement. Teams have already been established. We have all had extensive training in this area and are equipped to use research and effective practices to help set improvement goals and at the same time able to frame improvement strategies and interventions that are research-based and derived from proven practices to tackle the issues. (R-9, School B, p. 15).

All principals were highly regarded and considered largely responsible for the schools’ success. Through their praise, respondents revealed what they considered to be the most desired behaviors of the principal in an internal support role. Principals did not have to adhere to a cookie cutter mold but had to be: child-centered, care giving, open to new ideas, able to motivate and hold others accountable, willing to sacrifice their time and convenience for the general good, and model a strong work ethic.

Stakeholder Involvement

Research Sub Question 7. How did the Blue Ribbon School process involve all relevant stakeholders?

Partners in Education

All of the schools in the study acknowledged the importance of shared partnerships involving relevant stakeholders. It was evident that these cohesive school communities had reached out and touched everyone including students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and community. Communication between all parties was viewed as an opportunity to celebrate success as well as identify concerns. As expressed by many, the need to incorporate all constituents in a shared effort helped to achieve results and created an enriching school environment that produced widespread faith, hope, and confidence. Teachers and principals identified numerous systematic measures and strategies they found beneficial as they sought to involve those from the outside. These included but were not limited to providing ongoing workshops and programs for parents on such
issues as communication, discipline, peer pressure, and study habits. Other innovative strategies included the integration of technology linking parents to programs and resources within the community that provided support services. Homework hotlines serve as a resource for parents sharing reminders and suggestions on how they could help their child at home. Parent and community volunteer groups were established and considered by an overwhelming majority of the respondents as valuable assets to the school. They often served as tutors; mentors for children at risk, and on occasions were used to serve as translators for students who needed help in learning to speak English. Additional partnerships were formed providing opportunities for students to engage in apprenticeship programs as well as service projects. School Councils and Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) invariably played an integral part in the school community, offering a wide array of services to the school. All of these groups were seen by most of the respondents in the study as strong advocates who had become part of an inclusive, cohesive community, putting children first.

Achievement of Mutual Goals

A priority for the school communities in this study was the involvement of parents and families in the educational lives of their children. A Parent/Business Involvement Task Force was established at one of the schools to keep them informed, involved, and encouraged. Capacity building of the parents and community contributed greatly to the educational success of the children in each school, as reported by all of the teams. Realizing that the school alone could not accomplish all of its goals, many of the schools reported that teachers began to write short grant applications for specific needs. Local business and government officials were often invited to attend school functions and were
kept informed of school activities. Carefully planned events gave the parents and the local community an opportunity to participate in the life of the school.

Summary

The methods of discovery used in this research project explore and examine the perceptions and beliefs of principals and collaborative school teams regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status. The quantitative data was collected through the use of a demographic questionnaire in an effort to obtain a demographic profile of all the participants in the study. From the analysis of the quantitative data, it was found that six of the seven principals were females and held an Ed.S. Degree with one female near completion of her Doctorate in early spring. The only male principal interviewed already held a doctorate degree. The average years of experience in the field of education totaled 19. All of the principal interviewees were White.

The qualitative data for this research project were collected through the employment of the in-depth interview with the seven principals and the focus groups with 37 classroom teachers. Of all the teachers interviewed, one was a male. Only one of the teachers held a Doctorate Degree, nine teachers held an Ed.S. Degree, 24 held a Master’s Degree, and three held a B.S. Twenty nine of the teachers were White, and eight were Black. They averaged 16 years in education.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by the researcher; the interviews were then transcribed. By using the qualitative data analysis program, QSR NUD.IST 5, the transcripts were analyzed. Recurring themes, patterns, and note worthy responses to the interview guide questions were categorized and/or coded. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, each interviewee was assigned a number and the
The significant findings regarding (a) motivating factors to apply for the Blue Ribbon, (b) primary role in the implementation process, (c) impact of strategic planning, reflection, and assessment, (d) impact of collaboration and shared values, (e) professional growth and development, (f) perceptions of principal leadership and, (g) stakeholder involvement were presented in the form of text selections preceded by the term “Respondent” (R) or “Principal” (P) and the participant’s assigned number. A discussion of the significance and implications of the findings, as well as recommendations for further research are included in Chapter V.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to explore and examine the shared experiences of Georgia elementary school principals and teachers who applied and received the United States Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award over a three year time period. Quantitative and qualitative research techniques were utilized to conduct the study. The data from responses to the demographic questionnaire, the interviews, and focus group sessions were analyzed, yielding important findings concerning the process used to take these schools to the Blue Ribbon status. A discussion of the significance and implications of the findings of this study are presented in Chapter V.

Summary

The most compelling push in education today is for excellence in achievement for all students. The demographics of the nation, and hence, the student population, is becoming increasingly more diverse, while additional pressures on schools to perform at extraordinary levels are reaching an all time high. An era of high stakes has dawned and accordingly, students, parents, teachers, and principals are all expected to perform. There is little doubt that teachers and principals can lead the way to successful schools where all students can learn. However, a great deal of attention has been given to reforming schools from the outside, with little consideration as to how schools can be reshaped from within.
Since 1982, the federal government has recognized more than 4,000 exemplary schools in the Blue Ribbon Schools Program. To be recognized, a school must demonstrate a strong commitment to sustained success in achieving academic excellence for all students. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher interviewed selected elementary principals and collaborative school teams at seven Blue Ribbon elementary schools in Georgia. This researcher profiled those shared experiences, while giving meaning to the actions and dialogue of those who actively participated. The data collection consisted of scheduled one-hour interviews with teachers and principals. Transcriptions were analyzed and masked for anonymity. The researcher used QSR NUD.IST 5 software to aid in categorizing and coding the data to look for themes, commonalities, and important information within and across the transcriptions of the interviews.

The overarching question for the research was the following: What are the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and principals regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status? In addition, the study explored the following research sub questions:

1) What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue Ribbon status?

2) What role do teachers and principals play in the Blue Ribbon implementation process?

3) What aspects of the Blue Ribbon Schools process do teachers and principals believe had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and self-assessment at the school site level?
4) To what extent do collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall Blue Ribbon Schools process?

5) What are the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding professional growth and development?

6) What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership?

7) How does the Blue Ribbon Schools process involve all relevant stakeholders?

In the present chapter, the researcher used the findings related to each of the above stated research questions in order to draw conclusions and to consider the implications for the study.

Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, examine, and discover the shared experience of Georgia principals and teachers who participated in and achieved the United State Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award at seven elementary schools. The quantitative data provided a demographic profile of the participants in the study yielding aggregated information concerning the participants’ gender, race, and school experience. The qualitative data analysis gave more in-depth and insightful descriptions regarding the shared experiences of elementary principals and teachers regarding their perceptions and beliefs on the overall process used to take their schools to the Blue Ribbon status. In addition, the data provided significant information regarding the motivation to apply, role during the implementation process, aspects of strategic planning, reflection, and collaboration, principal leadership, professional growth and development, and stakeholder involvement.
SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue Ribbon status?

Discussion

From the analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews of the seven principals and thirty-seven teachers, the researcher found that the major premise surrounding their decision to apply for the Blue Ribbon Award was clearly to demonstrate and validate the pursuit of educational excellence for all students. The responses to the question regarding their decision to apply for the Blue Ribbon echoed similar answers. An overwhelming majority responded quite favorably. As respondents spoke passionately about their personal beliefs regarding the decision to apply, the researcher was able to capture a collective sense of purpose, as well as a feeling of commitment to ongoing school improvement efforts at the school site level. Respondents spoke unpretentiously about how they were able to work collaboratively in pursuit of a common goal. This sentiment complimented DuFour and Eaker (1998), who strongly believed that schools that embraced norms of quality performance, change and efficiency, with staff members gladly experimenting with new approaches, would succeed in fostering a community spirit valuing progress. The researcher’s findings also agreed with Fullan’s (2002) philosophy, which implied that when teachers were engaged in practicing, studying, and learning together, they were able to build capacity at all levels throughout the school. The researcher soon realized that this was indeed a critical element as teams spoke of how empowered they had become. This philosophy was quite similar to Lambert (1998), who believed that the roles and responsibilities of teachers should mirror a much broader contribution in schools, thus, allowing them to assume roles outside the traditional
structure. The researcher’s findings agreed with this notion, and compared it to Morgan (1997) who stated that positive school cultures that acknowledge the contributions of all its members would ultimately succeed in helping to develop a more cohesive working environment and furthermore produce dramatically improved results.

Recognition and accomplishment were found to be secondary factors of each school’s desire to move forward in pursuit of the Blue Ribbon. The researcher found similarities in these responses as well. Interviewees further revealed how the process itself served as a powerful motivator. Having received national recognition, as reported by several principals, attracted an overwhelmingly high number of quality applicants for positions as teachers, supervisors, and principals. It was further found by the researcher that the national recognition subsequently had served as an incentive for other schools within the district to apply or work towards national recognition, which subsequently resulted in better programs throughout the district.

The researcher found this aspect quite impressive and compared it to Dufour and Eaker (1998), who emphasized that reflection and dialogue were essential to the inner workings of a school. It was through open dialogue and stimulating conversations with the various school teams that the researcher was able to more fully understand the motivational factors associated with their desire to apply for the award. It became obvious through the researcher’s eyes that these schools had in fact made a significant difference as they shared their emotions, temperaments and visions. The researcher was also able to hear first-hand how these schools were able to sustain certain qualities that distinguished them from others.
Teachers in this study discussed how restructuring tools were used to help them function as a true learning community. The researcher was impressed and eager to hear how opportunities were often given to afford them the opportunity to collaborate during the workday to discuss pertinent issues, how they helped to support one another to achieve the school’s mission, and how they used this time together to celebrate all the exciting things that were occurring at their school. This was viewed by the researcher as a critical component as teams relived the Blue Ribbon experience. It further solidified the notion that individuals working together were far more productive than when they worked alone. This compared to Marzke, Fester, & Mullen (1997), who underscored that collaboration should serve as a powerful stimulus for schools interested in self-renewal, change, and improvement. A study conducted by Anderson (1999) emphasized the same premise. This author stated that schools on a continuous path to transforming themselves into reflective learning communities were those that promoted ongoing learning by teachers, thus, creating an environment with a shared purpose. On the other hand, DuFour and Eaker (1998) also acknowledged the fact that there may be times when there is a lack of a compelling vision in schools. This fact remains a major obstacle in schools, particularly when they embark on efforts to improve. The researcher believes that until educators can describe the school they are trying to create, it will be impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make their ideas realities. Building a shared vision may be an ongoing, never-ending, daily challenge; however, involving teachers in the process must be strongly supported. The researcher believes that developing a vision unites the school community of teachers, parents, and students by providing a common purpose and encourages commitment. The researcher
furthermore believes that any reform effort must be a community affair that includes the school’s commitment to a collaborative process that gives substantial authority to both the faculty and administration. When a process makes people feel that they have a voice in matters that affect them, they will have greater commitment to the overall enterprise and will take a greater responsibility for what happens to the enterprise.

**SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What role do teachers and principals play in the Blue Ribbon implementation process?**

**Discussion**

From the analysis of the qualitative data from the interviewees, the researcher found that these schools had been successful in creating and sustaining a collaborative environment. The Blue Ribbon process had undoubtedly encouraged these schools to strive collectively in meeting higher standards of performance and quality improvement. The researcher, therefore, referred to the respondents in this study as a collaborative team on a shared mission with a common purpose. As teachers talked passionately about their Blue Ribbon experience, they were eager to point out how energized they felt in working together as a team to achieve together what no one could have managed to do alone. The researcher was surprised to hear of how team members discussed prior working conditions in which collaboration was not encouraged. The researcher was also amazed to hear how isolation between and across grades at former schools had become so entrenched that fostering meaningful collaboration had unfortunately become a significant challenge.

Brownell (1997) stated that often times there will be cultural characteristics in schools as well as structural and administrative qualities that either support certain school
cultures or inhibit them. This reality constitutes a major barrier to sustained collaborative projects. Principals could also hinder the building of collaborative environments simply in the way they approached a certain topic. The researcher strongly agreed with Harris (2000), who believed that at the core of any school improvement effort should be a whole new way of teachers and leadership working together. The researcher firmly supported the theory that schools should engage in on-going improvement and find ways for teachers to function as leaders and decision makers in an attempt to bring about fundamental change. Essentially, school improvement is the engine that necessitates the reconceptualization of leadership, where teachers and principals are expected to engage in shared decision-making and risk-taking. The emphasis, therefore, should be based upon active and participatory leadership in school improvement work, rather than top-down delegation.

Peterson and Deal (1999) pointed out that when schools valued collegiality and collaboration from all individuals, it resulted in a better climate for the social and professional exchange of ideas, the enhancement and spread of effective practices, and widespread professional problem solving. The researcher disagreed with the assessment made by Brown & Sheppard (1999) who asserted that when teachers were expected to implement substantive changes at the same time they are trying to manage everything else in their overburdened schedules there was little chance that initiatives would be sustained. Adelman & Panton Walking Eagle (1997) strongly emphasized that time was a quintessential element, but was not often readily available for school personnel. In light of this fact, the researcher discussed this aspect during focus group discussions, and found that several teacher respondents had mixed feelings regarding the time element
factor. It was discovered by the researcher that the Blue Ribbon process, as expressed by several school teams was often times overwhelming and tedious, primarily because of the paperwork and time-consuming nature coupled with long hours that were required in meetings with colleagues outside the regular work day. To some, it became quite stressful. For others, it was viewed as a time to reflect and share best practices with colleagues. In spite of the added pressure to meet scheduled deadlines, the researcher found that the overall process had succeeded in validating school-wide participation that resulted in thoughtful decisions for improvement. The research supported this concept which was very consistent with that identified by Lezotte (1997), who pointed out that the best performing organizations were those that defined their jobs in terms of identifying and constantly communicating commonly held values. It became obvious to the researcher that these characteristics were customary at each school studied in spite of the overwhelming degree of paperwork required throughout the experience.

Ongoing discussions with teachers revealed how critical communication was throughout the Blue Ribbon School process. Teachers and principals pointed out that they wore many hats and played various roles during the process. Like Senge (1996), this researcher found that when members in a school community talked openly with one another, reflected about situations and challenges, discussed relevant subject matter, and reflected on their beliefs and perceptions, school communities thrived. Heifetz and Laurie (1997) pointed out that giving a voice to all people was the foundation of an organization that was willing to experiment and learn. The researcher applauded this thought and further agreed with Glickman’s (1998) remarks that indicated that almost anyone in an organization could potentially serve as a “change agent,” shaking up the
status quo, forcing an organization to question its assumptions. The researcher found that these individuals had been successful in creating such schools whereby the use of honest inquiry to examine past practices produced positive results. Like Lambert (1998) who believed that it was necessary to begin inquiries by evoking previous experiences, assumptions, values, and beliefs about certain issues at hand.

The conversations with school teams revealed extraordinary accounts of what they truly believed as educators. They spoke candidly about the need for fostering a culture of decency, trust and respect. This belief according to the researcher had invariably increased the likelihood of their success. The messages were clear and consistent. The researcher found that the overall process had energized the entire school community and offered participants many opportunities to portray various roles throughout the process. The two most significant were that of active learner and reflective practitioner. Through shared decision-making and site-based improvement efforts, teachers felt empowered, thus, creating a sense of ownership which ultimately resulted in considerable improvements in all areas of the school. These schools were not merely seeking the Blue Ribbon; they were working collaboratively for sustainable change and improvement, ensuring opportunities and success for each and every child.

**SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 3:** What aspects of the Blue Ribbon Schools process do teachers and principals believe had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and self-assessment at the school site level?

**Discussion**

An overwhelming majority of the respondents in the study viewed the Blue Ribbon process as a collective commitment to the guiding principals that articulated what they
believed and what they sought to create together. Like DuFour and Eaker (1998), they articulated that these guiding principles were not simply expressed by those in positions of leadership, but were embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the entire school community. Accordingly, in Senge’s (1996) study, he confirmed that when staff members engaged in constant reflection, self-assessment and renewal at the school level, it would produce dramatically improved results. Leithwood and Louis (1998) maintained this same position. These researchers pointed out that there must be collective responsibility, with a direct focus on student learning reflected in practice. This was compared to Bunting (1997), who stated that when teachers were learning from one another, both formally and spontaneously, an ideal climate emerges, forming a collaborative professional community. The researcher found this aspect evident in all of the schools visited. Like Theissen and Anderson (1999), the researcher supported what they felt were essential elements in schools. These researchers viewed collaboration, reflection, and assessment as means to challenge conditions, and develop leadership capacities, while engaging teachers in a culture of continuous inquiry and improvement. The researcher strongly supported this concept and discovered that the process had succeeded in serving as a valid self-assessment vehicle for school renewal. The researcher further concluded that it was these practices that fostered a deeper understanding among and across schools and were instrumental in helping to sustain meaningful change and improvement.
SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 4: To what extent do collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall Blue Ribbon process?

Discussion

The respondents in the study valued the elements of collegiality and collaboration. It was ultimately these values that characterized the positive discussions that emerged during focus group interviews. The researcher characterized all of the respondents as motivated, committed, and inspired in doing what was best for students. The researcher found these qualities quite intriguing and concluded that such qualities were perhaps the primary reason why their schools had become so successful. In addition, the researcher believed these attributes were instrumental in helping them to sustain meaningful change and improvement. This belief was compared that of DuFour and Eaker (1998), who stressed that a commitment to continuous improvement, innovation, collective inquiry, and the sharing of values is the fuel for all successful improvement efforts. The researcher strongly supported this assumption and agreed that there must be a collaborative work structure to increase involvement, promotion of active engagement, and affiliations across staff. Joyce and Calhoun (1996) emphasized that when professional potential and human needs were satisfied, as was the moral purpose, teachers would become more motivated through seeing their professional skills valued. This study concurred with these findings. The researcher found this to be consistent with Lambert (1998) who asserted that when teachers were able to contribute in ways that fostered collaborative engagement, new and amazing behaviors emerged. The researcher furthermore discovered that collaboration had become the norm as well as an essential element in the Blue Ribbon self-renewal process. This compared to the assessment of
Serns (1997), who noted that collaboration provided opportunities to bring harmony to theory and practice while establishing a sense of continued obligation between the teaching community at these schools and the teaching profession itself.

Working on the Blue Ribbon application, while fostering collaboration, according to Sparks (1997), afforded these teachers the opportunity to examine and test new ideas, methods, and materials, while subsequently expanding their own pool of ideas to improve student learning. Pounder (1998), who supported this theory, stated that collaboration is an important mechanism for promoting leadership and establishing a sense of community at the micro level. Deal and Peterson also accepted this notion, and pointed out that shared values must be the conscious expressions of what an organization stands for. DuFour and Eaker (1998) implied that once members of a school organization agreed on its purpose, and took the necessary steps to achieve its mission, the entire school community could subsequently address the issues of shared values and goals. Research findings from various educational settings consistently cited the identification of core values as critical elements in the school improvement process. This research confirmed that the majority of the respondents in this study had succeeded in demonstrating high levels of loyalty and strong norms of professionals who shared a mutual responsibility for achieving excellence for all students.

SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 5. What are the perceptions of teachers and principals regarding professional growth and development?

Discussion

The review of literature and discussions with school teams confirmed that professional development had served as the catalyst for professional growth. (Guskey,
2000; Vukelich & Wrenn, 1999). The researcher agreed and considered this added value as a vital and daily aspect of a teachers work. As noted by several respondents, professional development was instrumental in promoting new ways of thinking, had increased their motivation to try new methods and ideas, and was a way to involve them in collaborative inquiry throughout the Blue Ribbon process. An overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that professional development was vital to the success of their schools. The researcher agreed with Halligan (1999), who stated that collaborative critical thinking was an integral part of teachers’ professional growth and development and had positively influenced student learning.

The researcher listened to various groups share their stories of how teachers often engaged in ongoing professional staff development sessions throughout the year. The workshops were generally designed by teachers and offered at the site level which they believed were most effective. The researcher compared this to a study conducted by Ornstein and Behar (1995) who indicated that involving participants in key decisions about professional development was necessary for a program to have its greatest impact. A supportive context required both a “top-down” and “bottom-up” approach. The researcher strongly supported this concept and agreed that in order for professional development to have its greatest impact, programs should be measured by their effectiveness in developing individual teachers as well as providing the opportunity and structure to improve the schools’ capacity to teach all children successfully. This conclusion supported the findings of Moore (2000), who emphasized that professional development was an indispensable vehicle that teachers used to strengthen their
interaction with children and families, to improve work experience, to increase the quality of instructional programs, and to achieve local, state, and accreditation goals.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) stressed that effective professional development programs increased teachers’ understanding of how to provide school environments and instruction that were responsive to the development needs of students. Several respondents agreed with this comment and believed that professional growth had fostered a norm of continuous improvement, by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance student learning. They stressed emphatically that their principals made special arrangements for them to participate in effective development workshops by providing them with adequate time for inquiry, reflection, and mentoring, which they indicated was crucial to successful implementation. They further stated that professional growth and development had played an integral part in the creation and operation of professional communities at their schools particularly during the Blue Ribbon process. This finding was compared to Hawley and Valli, (1998), who acknowledged that several fundamental principles must be aimed at improved student learning. They asserted that professional development must be school-based, data driven, provide opportunities for individuals to engage in developing theoretical understanding of the knowledge and skills to be learned, and most importantly, follow-up activities scheduled which are aimed at improved student learning. The researcher found these characteristics effective in sustaining school improvement. The researcher concurred and strongly supported the fact that high quality professional development enabled teachers to move to the next level of expertise and ability.
Professional development, according to the researcher, stimulated teachers to raise their understanding of education and willingness to make changes that would improve students’ learning. True professional development, in the researcher’s opinion, should be self-motivated, collegial, and a process of learning relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes. The researcher furthermore, feels that these variables would increase the probability that the activities would be much more meaningful and focused and would lead to improved student achievement and continuous professional growth for teachers.

**SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 6. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership?**

**Discussion**

From an analysis of data from the qualitative focus group sessions with teachers, it was clearly pointed out by an overwhelming majority, that their principals were the ones who played a pivotal role in providing high quality learning at their schools and were instrumental in helping them achieve the Blue Ribbon. These findings were quite similar to Fullan (2001), who acknowledged the fact that the role of principal was crucial to a school’s overall effectiveness. The researcher further discovered through meaningful discussions that school teams believed their principals walked the talk, were visionary leaders, risk-takers, and modeled the behaviors that exemplified what he/she truly believed. This agreed with Terry (1999), who described successful principals as those who were able to lead by both example and direction, could excite and energize their staff, and furthermore had the ability to inspire and stimulate staff to reach greater heights. Like Leithwood (1999), who had similar findings, concluded that effective principal leadership included appropriate problem solving skills, encouraged
collaboration and teamwork, was skillful in maintaining group cohesiveness, committed
to academic achievement, and did not shy away from delegating authority.

The researcher is fully aware that the principal leadership role has become more
highly complex. The researcher also realizes that the principal of today must wear many
hats, and more importantly, must become a leader of leaders, binding the school
community together through a common commitment to shared values and ideals. An
overwhelming majority of the teachers agreed with this sentiment and stated that their
principal empowered them, and worked collaboratively with them to build shared norms
and beliefs about the most important aspect of school, improved student learning. They
reported that their schools shared governance structure was established in a manner that
elicited broad participation in decision-making. Patterson (1998), on the other hand,
argued that shared decision making did not automatically eliminate narrow self-interest
or make people more willing to take risks, and transforming attitudes required continual
effort and attention.

Teachers in all of the schools revealed that their principals regularly communicated
what was expected. They communicated expectations at staff meetings, through written
and verbal reminders, and closely monitored their practices providing feedback.
Teachers perceived that by modeling a commitment to learning, the principal influenced
their learning. One of the key findings from the discussions groups was that teachers
needed time to talk if shared meaning was going to be established. Principals needed to
assist teachers in finding time to talk. Several strategies were used that provided that
additional time to teachers; they encouraged informal gatherings, covered teachers’
classes to allow in school meetings, provided common release time, scheduled concurrent
prep times, promoted professional staff development, and provided additional resources and suggested strategies to allow teachers to get together.

It was found that these principals did more than organize grade groupings or teaching teams; they made sure that these groups had the necessary skills to work collaboratively to achieve their goals. Several teachers expressed with delight how their principal valued and appreciated them as professionals. Like Lyons (1999), this study found an overwhelming number of them indicated how they viewed themselves as leaders. They believed strongly that it was essential that they fostered good teaching and learning, provided a safe and orderly school climate, and most importantly, felt it necessary to inspire others through motivation, modeling, trust and respect. (Lyons, 1999).

Most of the teachers confirmed that their principal was viewed as a skilled team-builder, an instructional leader, and a visionary risk-taker. They were visible throughout the school day, and empowered and offered support when needed. The researcher found this aspect commendable, particularly with the myriads of responsibilities they incur from day to day. The research further agreed with Fink and Renick (2001), who described the central role of the principal as one who could mobilize the energy and capacity of teachers. This also compared to Terry (1999), who furthered described successful and skilled principals as those that who were able to create, by both example and direction, an atmosphere that motivated and inspired teachers. The researcher became even more interested in hearing the extraordinary stories of how a single individual was able to energize and inspire others to do what was best for students.

Findings indicated a remarkable consensus between the teachers’ perceptions of the leadership skills used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status at all schools. Vision
was mentioned most frequently. A majority of the teachers often spoke of high expectations for quality performance articulated by their principals continuously, as well as the enthusiasm, respect, and consideration their principals conveyed to others. An overwhelming majority noted that their principals recognized and appreciated them for their accomplishments, which in turn reinforced the values and ideas that supported a culture that valued collegiality, openness, and trust.

**SUB RESEARCH QUESTION 7.** How did the Blue Ribbon School process involve all relevant stakeholders?

**Discussion**

All of the respondents in the study revealed that there was a considerable amount of stakeholder involvement throughout the entire process. Teachers, parents, administration, and community members were viewed as assets to the school. The researcher found this component to be most important as teams shared the remarkable strides that were made because of these groups being involved. This aspect of the process became the center of many discussions. Focus groups in all of the participating schools generally reiterated that having a shared vision with their partner, common values, high expectations, and available resources were key ingredients in achieving success at all levels. The researcher compared this aspect to Sergiovanni (2001), who described schools as “nested communities,” in which collections of people are tied together by common foundational values. These values lead to “commitment to both individual rights and shared responsibilities” (p.88). Similarly, Mostert (1998) defined collaboration as a professional interaction between and among professionals, parents, and
families themselves to share information through collective decision making to develop effective interventions that are in the best interest of the student.

DuFour (1997) advised that significant school improvement would only succeed when stakeholders combined their focus in school structure to school culture. The researcher found this statement to be true, confirming what Fullan (1997) stated. Nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership. According to this research, stakeholder involvement doesn’t happen by accident or even by invitation. It generally happens by explicit strategic intervention. DuFour and Eaker (1998), emphasized that when schools collaborate with the wider community, they are able to help families connect to area resources, link educational programs with the realities of the schools, create community service opportunities for students and, more importantly, collaboration with stakeholders would help to promote effective contributions towards the achievement of mutual goals for academic success.

OVER ARCHING QUESTION. What are the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and principals regarding the process used to take their school to the Blue Ribbon status?

Discussion

It came as no surprise to the researcher that the most overwhelmingly common experience expressed by all the interviewees was the reduction in teacher isolation and an increase in teamwork, collegiality, and school pride. From the analysis of the qualitative data of both teachers and principals, the researcher found that they had thoroughly enjoyed the “coming together” aspect of the phenomenon and further indicated that the criteria had served as an invaluable school improvement strategy at the school site level.
These findings concurred with Marzke, Fiester, and Mullens (1997), who emphasized how the Blue Ribbon Schools Program had become a forerunner in national recognition programs with many school communities using the criteria as a self-assessment vehicle for ongoing school improvement efforts. The researcher supported this appraisal and agreed that the Blue Ribbon Schools process had undoubtedly served as a powerful motivator for substantial change and improvement.

From the interviewees’ responses to the opening question regarding their perceptions of the overall process, all appeared overly zealous and were eager to share their stories. What the researcher found was compared to Peterson (2002), who described it all so well. These researchers believed that individuals who engaged in continuous school improvement efforts exhibited similar qualities. They were characterized as being motivated, committed, and driven by an enabling purpose. DuFour and Eaker (2001) shared comparable beliefs, describing the nature of school improvement as a process that promoted the concept of learning communities aimed at fostering school effectiveness and productivity. These individuals are united through shared understandings, common values, and a collective commitment to the guiding principles that articulate what they believe and what they seek to create together. The researcher was amazed by the degree of team spirit as individuals talked favorably about their Blue Ribbon experience. Several school teams spoke of collegiality and collaboration, noting that these elements had become essential throughout the overall process. The researcher acknowledged what Theissen and Anderson (1999) suggested. These authors concluded that in a collegial environment, principals and teachers actively talked openly about best practices. Teachers observed one another in their respective classrooms, worked together in
planning and designing curriculum, and engaged in meaningful and worthwhile
discussions. Collegiality in this sense resulted in better decisions, higher morale, trust
among teachers and principals, sustained interest in adult learning, and increased
motivation on the part of students.

Similarly, Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1997), characterized additional core practices
that they believed were common in a school-based professional learning community.
They emphasized reflective dialogue, joint problem solving, and peer collaboration where
teachers shared innovative ideas. According to Hord (1997), who likewise believed that
in order for success to occur, there must be a widely shared vision, a sense of purpose,
norms of continuous inquiry, and more importantly, an atmosphere of trust, respected,
open communication. He further asserted that when school environments fostered
positive school cultures, they resulted in greater productivity for both students and staff.

Through discussions and the retelling of stories, the researcher was able to gain
personal and shared perspectives regarding the overall process. The greatest advantage
found by the researcher was the increased opportunity provided by the principal for
school teams to interact with one another to discuss school-wide issues. This school wide
approach increased teachers’ sensitivity regarding each others’ roles and responsibilities,
and thus succeeded in establishing a strong collaborative work ethic that enhanced
teacher morale. This innovative approach subsequently provided teachers with a support
network. The researcher believes that the principal should enable organizational
members to become problem solvers. In facilitating the development of teachers as
problem solvers, the principal creates a collaborative school culture. In this way, the
principal is fostering vision building and creating norms of collegiality while respecting
individuality. In addition, the principal is, therefore, promoting lifelong teacher professional development that encourages teachers to inquire, to reflect, and collaborate in support of school improvement initiatives. The researcher found this aspect quite valuable as teams vividly remembered how the process had enabled them in fostering a more nurturing and positive school culture.

The researcher was thus able to conclude that these schools had exhibited all of these fine qualities and added that these characteristics accurately described why these schools were so successful in winning the Blue Ribbon. These findings were quite parallel to Morgan (1997) who believed positive school cultures were absolutely necessary, particularly in today’s schools. This researcher alleged that a school with positive school cultures was perhaps the single most important factor in organizational success or failure. The researcher discovered that there was a remarkable consensus between the teachers and principals at all schools concerning the overall process. The responses yielded comparable insights. The Blue Ribbon experience had undoubtedly provided the basis for school teams to engage in collaborative self-assessment and reflection at the school level. The Blue Ribbon process had furthermore enabled school teams to bond together in collective inquiry and discussions, creating a roadmap for them as they began to foster a deeper understanding of their schools’ goals, policies, and practices.

Many felt that going through the process was the best way for them to learn more about the programs extant in their schools. While Leithwood (1998) contended that the main challenge for schools was to determine the organizational conditions that fostered individual and collective learning, Bunting (1997) believed that teachers learning from one another, both formally and spontaneously created an ideal climate for success.
Through ongoing inquiry and collaboration, as was evident in these Blue Ribbon Schools, the researcher was able to conceive how these individuals were able to achieve the Blue Ribbon. Some of the interviewees admitted how surprised they were of what was revealed as they worked collectively in completing the application, while others reported how gratified they were by the assessment. Narrations were filled with expressions of joy, humor, exhaustion, and, occasionally, even disappointment. As success stories emerged through the discussions, the researcher soon discovered what Newman (1996) found in his extensive study of school restructuring; schools that succeed will be the ones that thrive in cultures that have a primary focus on student learning, a commitment to high expectations, support for innovation, and the motivation to continue searching for new and exciting ideas. The researcher, therefore, concluded that the primary reason these schools were so successful was because of the dedication and tenacity of school teams and administrators eager to engage in the professional exchange of ideas, the coming together to solve problems, and the relentlessness in their efforts to make possible what they believed could be accomplished collectively. The researcher further agreed with Peterson and Deal (1999), who also stressed that when individuals are able to come together for a common good, and are able to cast aside their indifferences for the sake of students, the likelihood of success would be far greater.

The researcher was inspired by the many unique qualities that distinguished these schools from others. As the researcher listened attentively to the stories of these individuals, it became apparent that the process had served as validation and affirmation of school pride. In addition, the process had provided a vehicle for school teams to share common professional language, stories of success and, most importantly, had increased
the probability of sustained quality professional development for teachers at the school. The researcher strongly believed that in order to create good schools, individuals must be willing to engage in ceremonies that celebrate improvement, collaboration, reflection, and learning. Reflection, as viewed by the researcher, is an essential aspect of teacher learning. It offers opportunities for school teams to explore ways of making teaching more meaningful for students. The researcher concluded that these Blue Ribbon Schools had encouraged this aspect and further found out during the focus group sessions, that teachers welcomed the challenges and questions because they were able to articulate their point of view and also had the opportunity to hear the views of their peers which was seen as a contributing factor to everyone’s learning. Time for teacher sharing was considered a priority at these schools and was built into the workday. In this way, teachers were able to develop a shared understanding.

Schools, like other organizations, according to Deal & Peterson (1998), should also be willing to develop a culture of behavioral norms that respond to the environment, to the people who work in the organization and to those they serve. From observations and discussions with both teachers and principals in this study, the researcher concluded that the Blue Ribbon process had succeeded in helping school teams become more conscious of their collective responsibility to provide the best education possible for all students. It was further noted by the researcher that these individuals had embraced the importance of working in an atmosphere of trust, respect and renewal. What’s more, the process had encouraged staff members to operate more as a professional learning community placing children at the forefront of their efforts. The researcher was amazed to have found this evident in each of the schools visited. The researcher also felt quite humbled to have had
the opportunity to hear first-hand how these incredible teachers and principals were
indeed making a significant, positive impact on the lives of many.

Analysis of Research Findings

1) The findings illustrated a remarkable consensus between teachers and principals
regarding their motivation to apply for the Blue Ribbon. From the interviews and
focus group portions of this research project, it appeared that most of them were
motivated by the opportunity to engage in a collaborative school improvement
endeavor with colleagues and peers. An overwhelming majority of them
expressed how this process had stimulated and encouraged the entire school
community to create a powerful, productive school environment in which
students with diverse needs could maximize their learning potential. They
further revealed how working collaboratively with peers in solving problems,
sharing mutual interest and common goals were extremely important to them.
They also acknowledged that the Blue Ribbon process had provided them with a
vehicle for sharing ideas and best practices, which they all agreed was essential
to sustained school improvement. A secondary motivational factor was the
recognition and accomplishment in achieving what no one could have managed
to do alone. Receiving national recognition was declared a powerful motivator
for many. Respondents confirmed that the Blue Ribbon process served as
affirmation and school pride, celebrated the hard work of students, staff
members, and families, while also building an overwhelming awareness of the
schools’ commitment to excellence in the broader community. Two of the
principals expressed how their schools were nominated and were not required to
complete the entire nomination packet. The Blue Ribbon criteria had been revamped, as a result of the most recent legislation, No Child Left Behind. These two schools had gained national recognition as a result of dramatically improved test scores on state mandated achievement test and attributed their success to the collaborative team concept approach coupled with strong effective leadership.

2) The responsibilities and demands of completing the Blue Ribbon application were viewed as a monumental task due to the relatively short time frame. Teachers admitted how the process occasionally strained relationships. Teachers further reported that the Blue Ribbon nomination packet seemed overwhelming and tedious at times and many team members often felt undue pressure. Responses to the interview questions clearly revealed that various roles were crucial as collaborative teams worked endlessly throughout the overall Blue Ribbon process. Some referred to their roles as reflective practitioners and active learners, while others viewed themselves as task masters and risk-takers. Participants further acknowledged that they had also served as collaborators, advocating connections between teams as they engaged in meaningful dialogue and mutual inquiry. In all cases, the Blue Ribbon process promoted staff members’ commitment to student success, and sustained school growth.

3) From the interview portion of this research project, the participants’ drive and determination in self-renewal and discovery could be concluded as a dominant theme in their quest to achieve the Blue Ribbon. Collaborative teams coming together for a common purpose was underscored by some of the participants. A majority of the interviewees also indicated that the overarching reason they
engaged in the process of school renewal and ongoing discovery was to reassess how the school could further support students. To implement successful collaboration, as pointed out by several interview participants, was an ongoing process that did not end with the planning stages. It required connections between and across grades levels. Both teacher and principal respondents all agreed that there had been many positive effects of collaboration at their school sites. They stressed that because of collaboration, better working relationships evolved between teachers, shared understandings became more prevalent, and a renewed sense of purpose of doing what was best for kids had become embedded in the hearts and minds of the entire school community. Several teachers emphasized that the process had enabled them to feel a sense of appreciation for one another’s knowledge and expertise. One of the most noticeable benefits was teacher reflection. Teachers believed that by having the opportunity to interact with others, to learn about each others’ beliefs, knowledge and attitudes, consequently brought about a school community with a shared language that ultimately led their schools in becoming a powerful and successful learning environment for all stakeholders.

4) The findings from the interview portion of this study regarding professional growth and development indicated that both teachers and principals strongly supported and encouraged long term improvements in the product of schooling. They confirmed that a significant factor in raising academic achievement was the improvement of instructional capacity in the classroom. Respondents in all schools believed that six critical characteristics must exist for successful
implementation. They must be 1) ongoing, 2) embedded within context-specific needs of a particular setting, 3) aligned with reform initiatives, 5) grounded in a collaborative, inquiry-based approach to learning, and 6) driven fundamentally by the needs and interests of the participants themselves.

5) The majority of the teacher respondents in the study believed that their principal played a key role in fostering the success of their school winning the Blue Ribbon. Additionally, findings revealed that the most desirable trait described by most teachers on effective principal leadership was his/her ability to create a positive school culture that was collegial, collaborative, and supportive.

6) A key finding in the interview portion of this study indicated that shared partnerships with all stakeholders were crucial in achieving mutually agreed upon goals. Involving the wider community in the educational process had helped to secure additional resources, enhanced specific skills amongst students, and resulted in the formulation of more positive relationships with the community. Interviewees further believed that when stakeholders served as advocates in school improvement efforts, they would be helping to create a network of shared understandings in the efforts to sustain an enriching and positive school environment for students.

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from the results of the study include the following:

1) Teachers and principals shared a common philosophy and were committed to providing a quality instructional environment for all students. All of the school teams had worked extremely hard in developing personal connections with one
another through everyday interactions and discussions as evident by the interviews. All agreed that their collaborative relationships originated at the very onset of the process and were sustained through open communications, commitment and respect for individuality.

2) The Blue Ribbon process had provided most teachers with a vehicle for sharing ideas, taking risks, and reflecting critically on classroom and school wide practices. It put them in a position of recognizing and appreciating the diverse talents and strengths of their peers. Having the opportunity to interact with one another during planning sessions enabled them to expand their knowledge and capabilities, which was crucial to sustained school improvement. However, some voiced, with much reluctance, the demands that had been placed upon them as they took on additional responsibilities in an already taxed teaching schedule. The extra demands and over-burdened feelings from a hectic school day were viewed as one of the largest impediments in the overall process. The criterion outlined in the Blue Ribbon nomination packet was intense and cumbersome. Both teachers and principals agreed that there was limited spaced available to complete several areas of the application, and frustration grew from several members at certain times during the process. Concerns were also brought to the forefront regarding the time-consuming nature and stressful demands of all the paperwork that appeared overwhelming. However, in spite of the demands of the overall process, many viewed their role as coach, reflective practitioner, and collaborator with much commitment and tenacity.
3) All of the interviewees agreed that coming together and contributing to the achievement of shared goals was very important to them. The Blue Ribbon process had consequently become the catalyst for effective decision-making, an avenue for positive school improvement, and an opportunity for sustained collaborative partnerships.

4) Collaboration and shared values brought them closer together as a professional family. Norms of active involvement and continuous improvement were stated as positive benefits throughout the process. They were able to apply the new ideas gleaned from team meetings and the information shared to solve problems, which resulted in the creation of new conditions for students in their own classrooms and an invigorating work environment for the staff.

5) Respondents expressed personal and professional obligations to engage in professional development. Responses to the interview questions indicated that most teachers and principals believed staff development activities were much more effective if they are well-planned, goal-oriented, site-based, and included the time element necessary to conduct follow-up activities. They further stated that professional development was critical in helping them to expand their repertoire of classroom skills and, furthermore, was instrumental in strengthening their effectiveness in the classroom.

6) The outstanding leadership traits as expressed by the interview participants included flexibility, sensitivity, tolerance, and the passion for being a visionary risk-taker. Teacher respondents stated that they admired how their principals celebrated creativity, generated trust, and rewarded innovation. They further
stated how they had become inspired and encouraged but, most importantly, humbled to be a part of such a caring and nurturing environment led by someone who believed in their capabilities as professionals.

7) The interview portion of this study regarding stakeholder involvement was favorable. This finding was supported by an overwhelming majority of the interviewees who stated that stakeholders serve as positive advocates in the educational process and are appreciated for their invaluable contributions to the school. As powerful allies, parents and the business community can contribute enormously to the enhancement of the total school program. Although 95% of teachers agreed that parental involvement was needed in their schools, the remaining 5% felt parents were genuinely interested in being involved, but lacked the time and energy due to an already hectic schedule. One hundred percent of the teachers, however, believed that good partnership is mutually beneficial. Many believed that communication must be two-way if it is to be effective. It was, therefore, concluded that stakeholder involvement should be encouraged in as many ways as possible. Fostering good home-school partnerships, as expressed by most, works best when there is mutual respect enabling each partner to participate in the decision-making process. Teachers feel that when schools view parents as partners and actively engage them in the process, everyone wins.
Implications

Based on discussions of the findings and the conclusions, certain implications arise at different levels of education. For the purposes of this study, the implications presented below are limited to policy-makers, school districts, schools, and classroom levels.

1) The results of this study suggest that the overall Blue Ribbon process was a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement, involving the entire school community in a common endeavor. In an effort to sustain the efforts, school districts need to recruit and hire administrators who can initiate, develop and sustain a vision for teachers working together. People in leadership roles must be skilled at team building since so many of the interpersonal activities require collaborative cultures. School districts need to facilitate professional development opportunities for administrators to obtain the knowledge and skills that support the development of collaborative school cultures. Administrators are considered the greatest influence in a school. Therefore, they must be committed to the process of collaboration and be willing to work toward building a collaborative culture within their school that supports it.

2) Schools should incorporate the numerous dimensions of successful learning communities in an effort to encourage dialogue and shared meaning between teachers. This will lead to the further enhancement of mutually agreed upon goals and create a more positive work culture for everyone who has a vested interested in children.
3) It is evident that the principal is the key player in establishing valued professional collaboration if it is to be sustained. Because of the increasing complexity of the school environment, effective principals must utilize the visioning process to include all organizational stakeholders in a community of collaboration. Within this community, principals must strive to establish consensus for the achievement of school goals. Individual support provided by principals is also a means of continuing the progress toward school goals. Principals should be encouraged to share the leadership function as a team so that people can provide complimentary skills and gain meaningful experience in role taking.

4) Collaboration between principal and teacher and between teacher and teacher is critical in sustaining school improvement efforts. Where the ideas come from is not nearly as important as how staff development is organized, how people are supported, and how teachers’ sense of efficacy can be enhanced. In schools with collaborative cultures, teachers are often intimately involved with the development and adoption of the mission for their school. Principals may utilize this process to facilitate group cohesion and to identify the particular commitment of faculty members. Facilitating cohesion allows stakeholders to see how their work, both personally and morally, ties to the school’s mission. Effective principals should constantly communicate the guiding principles—the vision and values—that guide the efforts and decision-making within their school.
5) In an effort to build the instructional leadership capacity within schools, the district’s central office should offer the following opportunities: monthly principal support group meetings, principal peer coaching, walkthroughs and learning walks, district institutes, and individual coaching. The transfer effect should be apparent at the school site for the application of similar conditions and experiences to foster a learning community among the faculty.

6) Every school may not benefit from competing for the Blue Ribbon award. Readiness must be determined by assessing multiple factors, such as five years of test score data, a mission that addresses academic achievement, the professional capacity of the faculty, the level of internal and external support available, and the willingness of the staff to collaborate. Otherwise, the risk of failure to achieve and its resultant demoralizing effect may be too great.

7) Schools are currently being held accountable to the demands of their marketplace and perceived as effective according to the framework, as evident in the Blue Ribbon application. Public schools feel added pressure for test score accountability. Therefore, using additional criteria as a benchmark for sustained school improvement efforts should also be considered.

8) Teachers are motivated more by recognition and internally-driven shared values than externally-imposed mandates. Faculties must have ownership in the self-assessment process. Organizational needs are more likely to be met when teachers derive individual, and shared meanings from their actions and activities.
9) Teamwork, collegiality, and school pride are critical to a school’s success. School leaders, including central office administrators, are advised to build upon these elements in order to maintain or develop cohesive organizational cultures. Structural changes alone have a minimal impact on school success.

10) School leaders must be able to motivate followers to work together toward common goals while sustaining a vision committed to student learning. Acknowledging the personal needs and professional expertise of teachers provides them with a sense of principal commitment to teacher growth. Principals must be able to establish and communicate high expectations for the work of teachers. The results of this study suggest that school improvement depends upon cultural elements and social processes. Cognitive learning theory suggests that learning is profoundly a social process depending on dialogue, language, and group processing. The development of cohorts in staff development programs provides a focus on this social process. Because cohorts remain together for multi-year periods, the cohort can be viewed as a laboratory for researching, learning, and practicing the collaborative, interactive, and social nature of collaborative relationships in schools. The cohort format could further enhance teacher self-esteem, provide peer support, and furnish networking opportunities. Instructors within these programs may utilize instructional strategies that model these social learning processes crucial to school improvement efforts.

11) The role of policy-makers certainly underscores an important factor in the development of successful learning communities. The policy environment has
provided both opportunities and constraints. Undoubtedly, some schools, particularly those whose clients are socially advantaged, have more favorable policy environments than others. One important task of future research is to document these differences and how they shape opportunities for schools to restructure themselves as learning organizations that can improve student achievement dramatically. Alongside these actual differences in the policy environment, school officials differ in their ability to exploit the policy environment in ways which enhance the potential for learning communities to be built. A second benefit of better research in this area would be to inform local school officials about the most efficacious strategies for using available opportunities to enhance reform and to improve their understanding of the specific cost and benefits of different strategies. Congressional initiatives in comprehensive school reform should continue to focus on organizing and revitalizing entire schools rather than on piecemeal approaches. In other words, acquiring better research information on the various features of the policy environment would be an integral component of the development of a sophisticated knowledge base on school communities themselves. Despite the serious challenges facing systematic reform, policymakers can establish ambitious goals and reinforce them with coordinated policies.

Recommendations

The wealth of data yielded by this study could be interpreted with yet deeper meaning. An expansion of this research might include:
1) Making available an increased focus on process-oriented organization within individual schools rather than schools as organizations. It is important for researchers to move beyond just describing the attributes of effective programs or characteristics of good schools, and perhaps extend this to focus on the processes associated with performance.

2) Additional Blue Ribbon School studies may be carried out by employing a combined approach, using qualitative methodology with quantitative assessment data, in part, to get at the possible cause-and-effect relationships between the varying factors identified in this study and reporting the school outcomes.

3) A longitudinal study may be conducted on schools engaged in the Blue Ribbon process in an effort to collect additional data over a period of time which could enrich the collection of data.

4) An investigation that concentrates directly on schools using the Blue Ribbon Schools criteria in the self-assessment process but that did not vie for the award, and/or more observations of school teams as they engaged in other self-assessment processes. Much can be learned from the experiences of schools engaged in the ‘process of becoming.’

5) Future investigation could be constructed to (a) include more participants (b) focus solely on the leadership at one school to investigate variance in perception and (c) involve more in-depth interviewing to obtain richer data by interviewing non-classified staff members to gain a more complete picture.
6) To conduct a study on the comparison of the leadership practices of principals of Blue Ribbon Schools with principals of randomly selected schools.


8) A study of the Blue Ribbon Elementary Schools and the Participating Teachers’ and Principals’ Perceptions of the Principals’ Leadership Proficiencies as defined by ISSLC Standards.

Dissemination

The results of this study speak to diverse audiences who are interested in school improvement. It is the researchers’ belief that the information found in this study will appeal equally to those who are also studying school restructuring and to those who are engaged in restructuring projects at the school, district, and state levels. There is much here that will be of interest. Teachers and principals may find connections in this study as they continue through conversations to discuss shared philosophies, beliefs and commitments to the learning and teaching environment. Educators will find promising information in the organization and governance of schools as they strive to promote reflective dialogue, collective endeavors, while engaging in the complexities of developing a collaborative school culture.

This research study adds to the educational literature by providing aspiring schools and school leaders an abundance of tools in helping to develop the commitment and talents of individuals seeking to provide a culture of success for all students in their learning communities. This research study presented some of the essential themes that define a new, broader view of leading education reform. Although this research study
provided just a glimpse of each school’s successes and challenges, it does, however, raise issues worthy of further study and reflection. A next step would be to create opportunities for representatives of the education community to discuss the issues presented and relate them to their own experiences. This kind of dialogue and reflection can, at best, create a base upon which the “plan for revitalization” for ineffective schools can be built. The findings of this study, furthermore, may be of particular interest to policymakers at all levels who want to discover a great deal of wisdom about how to develop facilitative structures for locally based improvement efforts. Scholars in the areas of school improvement will uncover, in this study, much that reinforces and extends an understanding of this complex activity.

This study should appeal especially to those educators who are involved in professional development aspects of restructuring, particularly those seeking information about ways to help schools develop the capacity for sustained growth. And finally, universities, schools of education, and publishers of educational journals, and anyone interested in the critically important task of reforming schools will also gain from the meaningful insights that have been presented.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the shared experiences of elementary teachers and principals in Georgia, who participated in and achieved the National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award, thereby, providing information that might afford insight for other schools seeking meaningful change and improvement. This study contained the findings from a demographic questionnaire concerning the participants’ personal, educational and professional background. The qualitative portion
of this study provided rich documentation of the lived experiences and perceptions of seven principals and 37 teachers who demonstrated a unified commitment to academic excellence. As the lessons from each school site were richly interwoven, the researcher was able to capture and convey the essence of what was experienced first hand. The respondents in this study were amazingly insightful, witty, and resilient educators, all dedicated to improving the quality of life for the sake of their students.

Words cannot adequately describe the personal power and professional commitment of the teachers and principals who participated in this study. Each participant believed that the overall Blue Ribbon process had enabled them to view collaborative planning, decision making and problem solving as necessary to create appropriate learning environments in which students with diverse needs could maximize their learning potential. By fostering the creativity of its organizational members, these school organizations were successful at building a climate and culture of continuous growth. The focus upon continuous growth may very well become a consistent theme in this complex and chaotic environment.

The seven Blue Ribbon Schools in this study undoubtedly possessed the structures and processes that promoted collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration professional development, a unity of purpose, collegial support among teachers, and a learning partnership among students, parents, teachers, and community. To develop and maintain a collaborative culture, such as the ones illustrated in this study, school communities should exercise a combination of these shared philosophies, beliefs and commitments to learning, which were found to be the major catalysts to creating a successful school. The responses, anecdotes, and experiences of these remarkable individuals should inspire
others to engage in future discussions regarding the social dynamics involved in leading transformational change and improvement efforts in their schools. Educational researchers, principals and those aspiring to seek meaningful change may utilize the results of this study to guide further research and to inform other school communities on how they may promote a caring, collaborative environment. It should further appeal to any scholar seeking information about ways to help schools develop the capacity for sustained growth. There are no ‘magic bullets’ that offer quick-fix remedies in this quest for sustained improvement. One must keep in mind that the path to excellence will only be made possible when those from within are eager, passionate, and, determined to make it happen. The journey may be an arduous one, but students deserve nothing less.
REFERENCES


Patterson, K. (2000). Grounding school culture to enable real change. *Education Digest,* 65 (9), 4-8.


Peterson, K. D. (1999). Time use flows from school culture: River of values and traditions can nurture or poison staff development hours. *Journal of Staff Development, 20*(2).


Richard, A. (2000). In the age of accountability a blue ribbon means a lot. *Education Week* 19(37) 1-16.

Richard, A. (2000). In the age of accountability, a blue ribbon means a lot. *Education Week* 19(37) 1-16.


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL CORRESPONDENCE
Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Phone: 912-681-5465
Fax: 912-681-0719

Administrative Annex
P.O. Box 8005
Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Ms. Dana Harris
529 Brandermill Road
Evans, GA 30809

cc: Dr. Catherine Wooddy, Faculty Advisor
1900 Bellevue Road
Dublin, GA 31021

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IRB/IRB)

Date: May 25, 2004

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered, H94156, and titled "The Process of Receiving A Blue Ribbon School: Perceptions of Participating Teachers and Principals," it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol, you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, whether or not it is believed to be related to the study, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator prior to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a Research Study Termination form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

Julie B. Cole
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
APPENDIX B

COVER LETTERS TO SUPERINTENDENTS,

PRINCIPALS AND PARTICIPANTS
To: Superintendent of Schools  
From: Dana Harris  
Date: June 23, 2004  
Re: Dissertation Research

As a graduate student at Georgia Southern University, I am currently working on a doctoral level research project. My research topic is *The Process of Becoming a Blue Ribbon School: Perceptions of Participating Teachers and Principals*. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board, but in order to begin, I am seeking your permission for this study to be conducted in your district. The primary purpose of this study will be to provide data that will assist teachers and principals in moving toward higher levels of performance. Moreover, this study will highlight the significance of professional educators as leading players in reform efforts whose aim is improved student learning.

The first step in the process will be to meet with each building level principal at their respective schools to discuss the purpose and methodology as well as their role as co-researchers in the study. School teams of approximately 6-8 individuals will meet in focus groups. A list of research protocol questions will serve as a basis for questioning with all sessions being audio-taped and later transcribed. The results of the study will be entirely confidential and pseudonyms will be given to ensure anonymity. All findings will be shared with each principal upon the completion of this project and will be reported in narrative form.

Please complete the attached response form seeking your permission and return in the self-addressed envelope for your convenience. If you should have questions or concerns regarding any portion of the above mentioned project, feel free to contact one of the addresses indicated below:

Mrs. Dana Harris, Principal Investigator  
529 Brandermill Road  
Evans, Georgia 30809  
Home# (706) 855-1952  
Work# (706) 737-7255  
E-mail address: harristah@prodigy.net

Dr. Catherine Wooddy, Advisor  
1900 Bellevue Road  
Dublin, GA 31021  
(478) 273-6748  
e-mail address: cwooddy@georgiasouthern.edu
Superintendent Response Form

Please complete the bottom portion of this form letter and return it to me at your earliest convenience. Thank you in advance for your consideration in this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

To: Dana Harris
From: Superintendent of Schools
Date:
Re: Dissertation Project

I hereby grant you permission to conduct this study in ______________ Public School System.

[Signature of Superintendent] ____________________  [Date] ____________________

Contact Information:
Mrs. Dana Harris, Principal Investigator
529 Brandermill Road
Evans, Georgia 30809
Home: (706) 855-1952
Work: (706) 592-3991
E-Mail Address: harris@prodigy.net

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research & Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
(912) 486-7758

Dr. Catherine Woddy, Advisor
1900 Bellevue Road
Dublin, GA 31021
(478) 275-6748
e-mail address: cwoddy@georgiasouthern.edu
To: Principal  
From: Dana Harris  
Date: XXX  
Re: Request to Participate in Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in my doctoral dissertation research project. The research proposal is: The Process of Becoming a Blue Ribbon School: Perceptions of Participating Teachers and Principals. This investigation has been reviewed and approved by the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board. Participation in this study will involve meeting with you for at least 45-60 minutes on two separate occasions. During which time, we will discuss the research protocol questions designed to illicit your response to the overall Blue Ribbon School Process. In addition, will be a need to discuss the selection of school teams to be seen in focus groups. This group should consist of at least 6-8 individuals who played a major role in the overall process at the school site level. With your permission, all interviews will be audio-taped in addition to log notes taken.

I recognize the value of your time and your willingness to participate is completely voluntary. Enclosed, you will find the interview protocol that contains the essential questions to be used during the interview and focus group sessions. Providing you with an opportunity to think about your responses should help the both of us. The results will be entirely confidential and the identity of your school will not be revealed.

Included with this letter is a response form along with the pertinent contact information should you have questions regarding any portion of this project. I will be contacting you within the next few days via telephone to discuss the possibility of meeting with you at your school.

Thanks in advance for your time, interest, and assistance. Your support is greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX C

SUPERINTENDENT AND PRINCIPAL RESPONSE FORM
RESEARCH PROJECT

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL:
PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATING TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

Participant Response Form

Name: ______________________  School: ______________________
Address: ____________________  Address: ____________________

Personal Phone Number: _________  School Phone Number: _________
Preferred Calling Time: _________  Preferred Calling Time: _________
E-Mail Address: ______________________

To: Dana Harris

_______ Yes, I would like to participate in the above-referenced research project. I have provided the above information to indicate the preferred means for you to contact me.

_______ No, I would not like to participate in the above-referenced research project.
To: Participant's Name  
From: Dana Harris  
Date: XXX  
Re: Participant Invitation

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in my doctoral research project. As a graduate student at Georgia Southern University, I am conducting research on: The Process of Becoming a Blue Ribbon School: Perceptions of Participating Teachers and Principals. My research will be a descriptive study exploring the perceptions and beliefs regarding the process used to take your school to the Blue Ribbon status. In addition, the study will investigate various aspects of strategic planning, self-assessment, and reflective practice at the school site level. The results of such a study may be useful to other schools interested in examining school improvement efforts whose aim is improved student learning.

You have been selected to participate in this research project because of your key role during the overall Blue Ribbon School Process. You will engage in a focus group session that should last approximately 45-60 minutes. A follow-up session of no more than 30 minutes may be needed. A list of interview protocol questions will serve as a basis for questioning. Additionally, will be a demographic survey to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary. I assure you that the results will be entirely confidential and the identity of the school will not be revealed.

I hope you will choose to be a part of this study. Enclosed is a letter of Informed Consent specifying all of the major components regarding this project. I ask that you read it thoroughly and if you choose to participate, sign the bottom portion and return to me in the enclosed self-addressed envelope at your earliest.

Thank you in advance for your time, assistance, and support. I look forward to hearing from you.

Please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter.

__________________________  
Yes, I agree to participate in the research study.

__________________________  
No, I am not able to participate in the research study at this time.

Signature  
Grade/Dept.  
School
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
DEMographic survey

This survey is an integral part of a study for a doctoral level research project at Georgia Southern University. The information gathered will be considered confidential and will be reported only as data for statistical analysis. Please complete each item. This questionnaire is to be answered anonymously. There will be no attempt to use demographics to attach names to responses.

Thanks in advance.

School ___________________________ School District ___________________________
Grade/Department ___________________________
School Location: Urban _____ Rural _____ Suburban _____
Position/Title ___________________________
Subject Area Taught ___________________________
Years of Teaching Experience _____ Years of Administrator Experience _____
Area(s) of Certification ___________________________
Education: Bachelors _____ Masters _____ Specialist _____ Doctorate _____
Sex: Male _____ Female _____
Race: Black _____ White _____ Asian _____ Native American _____ Other _____
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT
Informed Consent Agreement

Project Title: THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL: PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATING TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study:
The purpose of this qualitative study is to document and examine the experiences of Georgia elementary principals and school teams who applied for the United States Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award. This study will seek descriptive information regarding the perceptions and beliefs regarding the overall process of achieving the Blue Ribbon status.

What you will do in the study:
You will participate in focus group sessions with the researcher at your school at a scheduled time and location. During which time, you will be asked a series of research protocol questions. The sessions will be audio-taped and later transcribed. A copy of the transcription will be made accessible to you before you are transcribed. If you feel that any of the data does not accurately represent your meanings and perceptions, the data will be changed to meet your approval. The audio-tapes will be maintained in a secure place by the researcher until they are transcribed and then they will be erased.

Time required:
The total time for the sessions will be no more than 90 minutes. The focus group sessions will last approximately sixty minutes (one hour). A follow-up interview of no more than thirty minutes may be needed. The follow-up interview may take place in person or by telephonic.

Risks:
There are no anticipated risks associated with the study.

Benefits:
Teachers will benefit greatly from gaining a more thorough understanding on the impact of collaboration and reflective practice. Principals will gain a more thorough understanding of how their instructional leadership behaviors impacts school culture. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the knowledge and experiences educators endured throughout the overall Blue Ribbon School process. While this study will provide data that will assist teachers and principals in working toward higher levels of performance, it is significant because it will provide the guiding principals necessary for other schools and districts interested in cultivating a professional learning community. Additionally, this study could provide information to assist Curriculum and Staff Development Facilitators, RESA Intermediary Agencies, State Departments of Education in the design and implementation of leadership training and staff development programs that focus on change and successful school improvement initiatives.
Confidentiality:
The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. You and your school will be given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Voluntary Participation:
Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to Withdraw From the Study:
You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study after the interviews, the audio tape of the interview will be erased.

How to Withdraw From the Study:
If you want to withdraw from the study at any time, simply inform the researcher either orally or in writing prior to the tapes being transcribed.

Payment:
You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Who to Contact if you should have questions about the study:

Dana Harris, Principal Investigator
529 Brandermill Road   Evans, Georgia 30809
Telephone#: Home (706) 855-1952
Work (706) 737-7255
E-mail: harristah@prodigy.net

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research & Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Telephone#: (912) 488-7798

Dr. Catherine Wooddy, Advisor
1900 Bellevue Road
Dublin, GA 31021
(478) 277-6768
e-mail: cwooddy@georgiasouthern.edu

---

Participant Agreement:

I have fully read and understood the conditions outlined in this agreement.

______________________________  ______________________________  ______________________________
I agree to participate in the research study described above:

Signature of Participant        Position           School
APPENDIX F

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE
RESEARCH PROTOCOL QUESTIONS
(Principal)

1. What motivated your school to apply for Blue Ribbon recognition? Did you initiate the idea?

2. What was your primary role throughout the Blue Ribbon process?

3. What specific aspects of the Blue Ribbon process do you believe as a leader had an impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflection, and assessment at the school site level?

4. To what extent do you feel collaboration and shared values contributed in winning the Blue Ribbon? Are teachers/teams afforded times to discuss relevant issues during the school day? What mechanisms are currently in place to ensure that collaboration takes place?

5. What are your feelings towards professional growth and development and how strongly do you feel about its impact on instruction?

6. Describe for me what it means to be a principal of an elementary school? How would you define your leadership style? What specific qualities do you feel are essential as a leader?

7. What strategies are presently in place to promote and sustain lasting partnerships with families and the community? How vital do you feel their role should be in the school?

8. What mechanism do you currently have in place to promote the leadership capacity in your school? Are the teachers at your school willing to take on additional responsibilities? And if so, how is this aspect encouraged?

9. What did you learn from the overall Blue Ribbon experience? What advice would you offer to schools interested in applying for this award? Would you apply for the award again?
RESEARCH PROTOCOL QUESTIONS
(School Teams)

1. What motivated your school to apply for Blue Ribbon recognition? Describe for me the temperament and feelings of your team members at the very onset of this process.

2. What role did you play during the Blue Ribbon process? Did the overall experience elicit any new discoveries? If so, what were they?

3. What specific aspects of the Blue Ribbon process do you believe had a significant impact on the degree of strategic planning, reflective practice, and assessment at the school site level?

4. To what extent did collaboration and shared values contribute to achieving the Blue Ribbon status? Describe how these characteristics are promoted throughout the school community?

5. What are your personal feelings toward professional growth and development? Do you feel the school community as a whole has grown from this experience? If so, how?

6. What are your beliefs regarding principal leadership? In what ways does your principal articulate his beliefs to the staff? What words would you use to describe him/her?

7. How were you able to involve other relevant stakeholders in the process? How strongly do you feel about their vital role in schools?