

# What Teachers Think: An Investigation of Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Superintendent's Influence on Instruction and Learning

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## Abstract

*Using the conceptual lenses of superintendent instructional leadership and instructional capacity, this investigation explored teachers' views of their superintendent's ability to influence classroom instruction and teachers' ability to produce student learning. Data were drawn from seven medium sized school districts in the Midwest. Two hundred and seventy nine teachers completed a questionnaire that examined factors related to teachers' perceptions of the superintendent's role in fostering instructional capacity as well as involvement of teachers in their own professional development. Specifically this study addressed the following research questions: What are teachers' views of the superintendent in his role as an instructional leader? Do teachers perceive the superintendent as influencing their ability to produce worthwhile and substantial learning? Results indicate that teachers perceived a significant relationship among superintendent instructional leadership, the creation of instructional capacity at the district and school level, and teacher professional development and instructional practices. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications.*

**KEYWORDS:** Superintendents, Teachers, Instructional Leadership, Instructional Capacity, Instructional Practices

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Convention of American Educational Research Association San Francisco, California April 7-11, 2006

The current climate and emphasis on the reform and restructuring of the American educational system has placed an enormous amount of political pressure on schools to demonstrate effective leadership at the district level (Petersen & Young, 2004). A critical indicator of leadership effectiveness is the transformation of the core technology of curriculum and instruction. Districts are held accountable to provide powerful, authentic and rigorous learning for all students (Carter and Cunningham, 1997; No Child Left Behind Act 2001). The district superintendent is at the center of this educational endeavor. Although there is a significant body of literature that clearly articulates the role of the building principal in improving the quality of education and instruction (Barnett, 1987; Bullard & Taylor, 1993; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990; Short & Spencer, 1990; Smith and Andrews, 1989; Murphy, 1988; Ogawa & Hart, 1985; Peterson, 1984), only a handful of empirical studies examining the role and responsibilities of the district superintendent as an instructional leader have been published (Bredeson & Johanson, 1997; Coleman and LaRocque, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Herman, 1990; Hord, 1993; Morgan & Petersen, 2002; Petersen, 1999, 2002; Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1987; Wirt, 1990). Research in this area indicates the best linkages for instructional improvement are forged through an exchange process in which the superintendent, building administrators, teachers, board of education members and the community simultaneously work with each other (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

### **Conceptual Framework**

In the search for leadership variables that influence the academic success of schools, much of the research has focused on the relationship of the teacher and principal with a considerable amount of the initial research attempting to identify links of principals' instructional leadership practices to student achievement (Barnett, 1987; Larsen, 1987; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Extant literature has demonstrated that the instructional leadership responsibilities of a superintendent are markedly different in nature from the instructional leadership role undertaken by principals (Morgan & Petersen, 2002).

#### *Instructional Leadership of Superintendents*

Capturing a thorough understanding of the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of the district superintendent as an instructional leader has proven to be a long-standing

and elusive endeavor (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). In spite of the consistency of research findings, instructional leadership continues to be one of the more controversial characteristics associated with the examination of the district superintendent (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Lezotte, 1994; Wirt, 1990). A summary of six contemporary investigations examining the instructionally oriented skills, professional and personal behaviors, as well as the organizational relationships and structures established by superintendents in leading curriculum emphasize several things: (a) the importance of a clearly articulated instructional vision, (b) coordination and socialization of the individuals and groups responsible for teaching and learning, (c) the importance of maintaining a high level of visibility, (d) clear articulation of goals and instructional objectives, (e) monitoring and evaluating all instructional and curricular program implementations and (f) communication with various stakeholders (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Bredeson, 1996; Herman, 1990; Morgan & Petersen, 2002; Petersen, 1999, 2002). These investigations also illustrate that the district superintendent has influence but is also influenced by administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the board of education in focusing on the technical core of curriculum and instruction. Finally, more germane to this investigation is the fact that these studies provide evidence contrary to historical and current *conventional wisdom*, which implies that superintendents are too consumed with administrative and managerial issues to focus on the core technologies of curriculum and instruction (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

### *Instructional Capacity*

The end product for any school improvement effort is increased student learning. Students' experiences in schools are dependant on their opportunities to learn. Therefore, what gets taught is a strong predictor of student academic achievement (Spillane & Louis, 2002). Instructional capacity, with respect to instructional improvement, is "the capacity to produce worthwhile and substantial learning . . . a function of the interaction among elements of the instructional unit, not the sole province of any single element" (Cohen & Ball, 1998, p. 5). Spillane & Louis (2002) identify the following interrelated organizational components necessary for the presence and maintenance of instructional capacity: the classroom as a site for teacher learning, the development of teachers' professional community, and organizational learning. These organizational elements of instructional capacity are highly interactive and have important implications for school districts' efforts to improve the learning of students (Spillane & Louis, 2002).



To understand how instructional capacity influences the interaction of the elements of the instructional unit, Cohen and Ball (1999) examine each part: teacher, student, and material.

*Teacher.* Cohen and Ball (1999) write that a teacher's "intellectual and personal resources influence instructional interactions by shaping how teachers, apprehend, interpret, and respond to materials and students" (p. 3). Instructors' knowledge, understanding of content, and flexibility of content understanding affect teacher interaction with students around materials. Additionally, teacher resources are influenced by their relationships with students. Teachers must have an acquaintance with the students' knowledge and have the ability to relate to, interact with, and learn about the student. Also, a teacher's repertoire of means to represent and extend content and personal knowledge and to establish classroom environments combines to mediate how teachers shape instruction. Overall, a teacher's ability to use, develop, and extend his or her knowledge and capabilities can considerably affect instruction by how well they involve students around materials (Spillane & Louis, 2002; Spillane & Thompson, 1997).

*Students.* While most research and discussion of instructional capacity has focused on teachers, student experiences understandings, interests, commitments, and engagement also impact instructional capacity in the classroom (Cohen & Ball, 1999; O'Day, Goertz, & Floden, 1995). A student will bring experience, prior knowledge, and habits of mind into the instructional unit. These factors will influence how they apprehend, interpret, interact, and respond to curriculum and instructional materials and the teacher. A student will also interact with other students in the same learning environment, thus having a significant impact on instructional capacity in the classroom (Cohen & Ball, 1999).

*Materials.* Materials in the instructional unit consist of teachers and students being actively engaged in the learning process. Students interact with the teachers and materials through the textbooks and other instructional media, as well as problems, tasks, and questions posed by the instructor. Cohen and Ball (1999) and Spillane and Thompson (1997) state that instructional materials can mediate students' engagement with the content to be learned. Materials can also mediate instructional capacity by constraining or enabling students' and teachers' opportunities to learn. The more capable the teacher, the richer the instructional materials, and the willingness of the student all interact to facilitate the learning environment.

Although the interaction between elements of the instructional unit is dynamic and directly related to each part, teachers play a unique role in instructional capacity

(Cohen & Ball, 1999; Massell, 1998; O'Day, et al, 1995; Spillane & Jennings, 1997). A teacher's knowledge, experience, and skills affect the interactions of students and materials. Teachers mediate instruction and their interpretations of educational materials affects curriculum success. Likewise, their understanding of students affects students' opportunities to learn. Because teachers mediate all relationships within the instructional unit, they have the unique potential to influence classroom capacity significantly. Therefore, school and district leaders must not only target students and materials, but especially teachers to improve instruction and student achievement.

Several lines of inquiry, such as effective schools and professional community, have identified and described school-level structures and processes that are thought essential for instructional innovation (Firestone & Corbett, 1988; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Yet, these investigations shed very little light on the interaction among elements of the larger instructional unit (e.g., district superintendent, classroom teachers and building principals) and their influence on classroom instruction. Nor have they been designed to clarify our understanding of the role the district superintendent plays in facilitating and maintaining the instructional capacity of the district. "Without an understanding of the knowledge necessary for teachers to teach well... school leaders will be unable to perform essential school improvement functions such as monitoring instruction and supporting teacher development" (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 97). To make complex interactive relationships and practices of instructional capacity more transparent requires an in-depth exploration of the members of the instructional unit, specifically the district superintendent, classroom teachers and building principals. Through an exploration of these interactions we may arrive at a better understanding of how the interaction of these elements contribute to the development of instructional capacity and the influence of the superintendent on teachers' ability to provide quality instruction.

### **Purpose of Investigation**

Improving our understanding of the role of the superintendent in contributing to student achievement requires exploring the complex relationships between improvement efforts and the instructional unit (e.g., the school district). Given the current emphasis on academic accountability (e.g., NCLB), greater knowledge of district leaders who have been recognized as leading and facilitating academically success-

ful school districts will benefit both researchers and practitioners (Petersen, 2002). Specifically this investigation used the conceptual lenses of instructional leadership of superintendents and instructional capacity to explore teacher opinions, and views of the superintendent's influence on their attitudes and ability to produce worthwhile and substantial student learning.

The components of instructional capacity suggest a number of challenges for school leaders and the leadership profession, including anchoring leaders' work and preparation in learning and teaching, promoting a distributed understanding of leadership, nurturing the development of social trust, and facilitating the development of professional networks (Spillane & Louis, 2001, p. 96). Central issues for both leader preparation and leadership research will involve discerning what school leaders, in this instance, district superintendents, need to know about teaching and learning in order to perform key school improvement tasks and foster instructional capacity in their districts. Therefore an exploration of the superintendent's role in fostering instructional capacity within a school district permits this study to bring about new concepts regarding behavior and organizational clarity that is coterminous with the current emphasis of school reform and accountability as well as a movement to have superintendents function as instructional leaders.

Specifically the findings of this study will have implications for the academic discipline in the following areas:

- Significant contribution to the literature and knowledge base regarding the subtleties and dynamics of the interactive relationship of the district superintendent and teachers in creating and maintaining instructional capacity.
- Examination and reevaluation of the current education and training of administrators in their role as educational reformer and instructional leader.

Clearly our primary objective is an increased knowledge of the dynamics of these interactive relationships and the influence of the district superintendent on school improvement centered on instruction and student learning.

Specifically this study addressed the following research questions.

1. What are teachers' views of the superintendent in his/her role as an instructional leader?
2. Do teachers perceive the superintendent as influencing their ability to produce worthwhile and substantial learning?

## Methods

District administrators admit that the managerial reality of the position often forces them to concentrate on issues other than curriculum and instruction. Therefore, the selection process of superintendents for this study required the authors to use various criteria for singling out these instructionally focused district leaders (Björk, 1993; Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Duignan, 1980; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978–79; Morgan & Petersen, 2002; Petersen, 1999; Pitner, 1979).

### *Procedures*

Districts were selected to participate in this investigation based on several criteria. Although it was necessary to invite school districts that were identified (at the state level) as possessing characteristics and performance measures associated with high achieving school districts, there has been some criticisms of investigations that use only “*academically successful*” buildings or districts as locations for these types of investigations. Therefore in our attempt to find districts that were academically successful we also looked at districts that faced several instructional challenges, yet still exhibited significant levels of student achievement. While districts chosen to participate in this investigation were not randomly selected, non-random sampling is preferable for studies with this type of focus (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993).

### *Criteria for Selection*

To ensure similarity of districts, we employed the Public Education Evaluation Report [PEER] (University of Missouri, 2004)\*. The PEER report assigns districts into cohorts that are similar in per pupil expenditures (PPE) and free and reduced lunch (FRL). By placing districts into similar PEER groups, comparisons between like districts can be made. Districts are grouped from moderately low to very high PPE and FRL. PEER groupings for this investigation were generally characterized as having low per pupil expenditure and high free and reduced lunch. Student achievement data were used across all three grade bands (elementary, middle, and high school) to identify districts that demonstrated success district wide. Our intention was to identify districts appearing to have demographic and economic challenges that

would interfere with the academic success of students. Yet these districts, in spite of economic and resource barriers, consistently excelled in graduating students, meeting annual yearly progress in math and communication arts, and had student achievement above the state average (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** *District Selection Criteria and Demographics*

	Superintendent Tenure	# of Students	PPE	FRL	Graduation Rate	Math AYP	Comm. Arts AYP
Missouri Average			\$7,345	39.21%	84.2%	Not Met	Not Met
District 1	2 years	273	\$7,760	31.30%	100%	Met	Met
District 2	14 years	1300	\$6,234	56.97%	86.80%	Met	Not Met
District 3	8 years	702	\$5,370	52.69%	95.80%	Met	Met
District 4	14 years	764	\$5,859	55.52%	92.3	Met	Met
District 5	4 years	686	\$6,548	19.95%	86%	Met	Met
District 6	13 years	728	\$7,992	15.55%	94.90%	Met	Met
District 7	20 years	603	\$5,795	50.20%	97.50%	Met	Met

In selecting participating districts, we used the following criteria: size of the district (number of students), tenure of the superintendent, student population, per pupil expenditures (PPE), percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch (FRL), high school graduation rate, and annual yearly progress (AYP). When combined, the criteria generated a viable pool of districts to effectively investigate the superintendents' roles as instructional leaders and their influence in the development and maintenance of instructional capacity.

The number of students in each district participating in the study ranges from 273 to 1,463 students with an average population of 722 students in these seven districts. It should be noted that of the 524 school districts in Missouri, 342 (65.4%) have a student population below 999 (2005 Report of Missouri Schools, January 2006).

Superintendent tenure ranges from 2 to 20 years. The average tenure of a superintendent in these districts is 10.7 years. The experience (tenure) of these district leaders were calculated only for the time spent in their current districts. The table does not list the total years of experience these individuals have had in the role

of superintendent. For example, District One's superintendent, while having only two years of experience in the current district, has six years total experience as a district leader.

The per pupil expenditure (PPE) of participating districts ranges from \$5,370 to \$7,992 with an average of \$6,508, which is below the state average of \$7,345. Only two of the seven districts exceed the state PPE average with the remaining five significantly below the state average.

The free and reduced lunch (FRL) of these districts ranges from as low as 15.5% to as high as 56.9% of students qualifying as low income. The FRL average for these seven districts is 40.2%, which is slightly above the state average of 39.2%. As the data reveals, four of the seven districts were above the state average with an FRL of 50% or higher.

High school graduation rate was used as an indicator of the districts' ability to get students to fulfill district requirements for graduation. Missouri's average graduation rate is 84.2% for all school districts. All of the participating districts had graduation rates from 86% (lowest) to at 100% (highest). The group average is 93.3%, which is well above the state average. While the study's population faced significant challenges with below average funding and high populations of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, graduation rates in these districts reflect their success in graduating students.

Finally, we used districts' abilities to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) for math and communication arts. When looking across all 524 districts in the state, most districts in the state have not met AYP for either math and/or communication arts (2005 Report of Missouri Schools, January 2006). Of the seven participating, six have met AYP in both subjects in academic year 2003-2004. The one remaining district met AYP in math but did not in communication arts. These districts demonstrate a reasonably high level of student achievement well above the state average.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

This investigation made use of concurrent mixed method procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), including semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted with each superintendent and a self selected sample of teachers in each of these districts. This paper reports the responses of classroom teachers and school personnel to a questionnaire designed to examine factors related to teachers' perceptions of their district superintendent's instruc-

tional leadership, the superintendent's role in fostering and supporting instructional capacity, and teachers' views of their own learning and instructional planning. The questionnaire was given to all regular certified teachers, teacher aids and school personnel within each of the seven participating districts (N=279).

### *Instrumentation*

Based on interview data and extant literature examining instructional support in schools and districts (e.g., SASS surveys), a survey instrument was designed and field tested by the authors. The questionnaire had three primary parts: teaching professional development and instructional practices, instructional capacity, and instructional leadership of the superintendent. The demographic, professional development, instructional practices and instructional capacity items on the questionnaire are derived from selected questions on Public School Teacher Questionnaire and School District Questionnaire of the School Staffing Survey (1999–2000) developed by the United States Department of Education. Instructional leadership items are adapted from empirical studies focusing on the role of the superintendent as instructional leader and McEwan's (1998) *Seven steps to effective instructional leadership*.

Semi-structured ethnographic qualitative focus group interviews consistent with qualitative data collection techniques were used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003). Teacher interview data were collected by seven focus groups consisting of five to eleven participants. Protocols were used in all focus groups with classroom teachers and the superintendent. Participants were selected for the focus group through district-wide announcements from the superintendent's office. While focus group data collection was aligned with contemporary methods, because the participants were ultimately selected by the superintendent there were limitations to the findings. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow for triangulation and a convergence of findings.

### *Analysis*

Three types of quantitative analysis were conducted on the completed surveys. First descriptive statistics (frequencies, means and standard deviations) were computed for the purposes of summarizing the demographic characteristics of the sample and the ratings for each item appearing on the survey. Second, Cronbach coefficient analyses

were conducted in order to ascertain the degree of internal consistency exhibited by the instrument measures and subscales. Third, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were calculated to test the overall strength and relationship of the subscales that measure instructional leadership of the superintendent, instructional capacity, staff development, and instructional practices supported by the district superintendent. Field tests and summary analysis of the questionnaire revealed the internal consistency estimates (coefficient alpha) for each of these subscales: Teacher Professional Development and Instructional Practice (.84), Instructional Capacity (.95), Instructional Leadership of the Superintendent (.95).

Perceptions of the superintendent and personal experience of focus group participants were gathered to assist in the development of codes and themes for qualitative data analysis. To accomplish the qualitative data analysis, the focus groups data were analyzed in three separate stages. First, the data was analyzed by creating coding categories (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). These coding categories were generated by examining themes using the primary focus areas of superintendents and instructional capacity outlined by the quantitative data analysis. Using the quantitative focus areas was necessary to ensure that data from both methodologies could be analyzed in a systematic manner for the mixed method triangulation analysis (Creswell, 2003). Next, the coded categories were submitted to analysis focusing on the common themes, which generated cover terms (Spradley, 1979). Last, the qualitative data was submitted to a two-part domain analysis (Spradley, 1979). The domain analysis consisted of analyzing the cover terms for a semantic relationship to each of the three focus areas.

The qualitative data were coded using constructs initially examined in the quantitative data (Superintendent and Instructional Capacity, Superintendent's Instructional Leadership, and Professional Development and Instructional Practice). Using Spradley's (1979) domain analysis, the three domains were used as a framework to organize and analyze themes that were generated from qualitative coded data. The advantage of using domain analysis in this study was the ability to merge the qualitative data with domains examined in the quantitative data. Specifically, the themes generated from the qualitative data analysis could be compared to quantitative data by using the same domain to analyze data across methodologies (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

### *Rationale for Using a Mixed Method Design*

The rationale for utilizing any method for a study rests with the purpose and assumptions of the research questions (Creswell, 2003; Newman & Benz, 1998; and Patton, 1990). Tashakkori and Teddie (1998) highlighted “the best method is the one that answers the research question(s) most effectively and with foremost inference quality. Mixed methods are often more efficient in answering the research questions than either qualitative or quantitative alone” (p.167). The choice of using a mixed method design for this study was directly linked to the types of research questions.

The first set of research questions investigated the relationship between teacher and principals’ perceptions of the superintendent related to instructional capacity, and the second set of questions investigated the role of a superintendent in developing instructional capacity and how they influenced the instructional unit in the classroom. Each set of questions required different research methods to sufficiently and accurately explore the phenomenon. The advantage of a mixed method approach to this study was the blending of strengths and overcoming the internal weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methodology.

Finally, a mixed method study allows researchers to expand understanding from one method to another and to merge findings from different data sources. It allows one set of data to complement the other to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexities the superintendent has in developing and maintaining instructional capacity.

## **Results**

The classroom teacher was chosen as the unit of analysis to investigate individual perceptions in this investigation. Classroom teachers ( $N = 268$ ) as well as other school professionals ( $N = 11$ ) in these seven school districts responded to survey (see Table 2). Data from responding teachers and other professional staff were used to investigate the following research question: To what degree do teachers’ perceive the superintendents as influencing teachers’ ability to produce worthwhile and substantial learning? This question investigated the relationship between teacher perceptions of the instructional leadership of the district superintendent and his/her ability to support teacher learning, professional development and instruction.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics: Teachers, Educational Professionals and District Sites

<b>Classification of Main Assignment</b>	N	%
Department Chair/Lead Teacher	7	2.5
Regular Full-Time Teacher	246	88.2
Part-time Teacher	9	3.2
Teacher aide/paraprofessional	6	2.2
Other Professional (School Counselor)	11	3.9
<b>Education level</b>		
Associate of arts/technical	10	3.06
Bachelor of arts/science	129	42.2
Master's Degree	131	47.0
Educational Specialist (Ed.S.)	6	2.2
Doctorate	3	1.1
<b>Total years of experience as a teacher</b>		
< 5 years	82	29.9
6 to 10 years	64	23.4
11 to 15 years	37	13.5
16 to 20 years	25	9.1
21 years>	66	24.1
<b>Length of tenure at this school</b>		
< 5 years	139	49.6
6 to 10 years	72	25.8
11 to 15 years	23	8.2
16 to 20 years	16	5.7
21 years>	30	10.7
<b>Grade level taught (Academic Year 2003–2004)</b>		
Pre K–5 (Elementary)	141	50.7
Middle/Jr. High (6–8)	46	16.5
High School (9–12)	83	29.9
Alternative School (various grades)	4	1.4
District Level	4	1.4

Note: n= 279 teachers and educational professionals.

A significant component of instructional capacity is the teachers' interaction with students and materials which are dependent on the instructors' knowledge, understanding of content, and flexibility of content understanding (Cohen & Ball,

1999). Because of this we were interested in the types of professional development teachers received in these districts as well as any professional development support experienced. Teachers had a wide variety of professional development options. Everything from school district and building sponsored workshops to professional growth activities and seminars sponsored by professional associations.

When queried about the types of professional development and whether teachers regarded these opportunities as beneficial, teachers responded that they these professional development experiences provided new information (M = 5.16, SD = 1.46), helped them change their views of teaching (M = 4.05, SD = 1.48), caused them to seek further information (M=4.78, SD = 1.42) and more importantly caused teachers in these districts to change their practices in the classroom (M = 4.70, SD = 1.35) (See Table 3).

**Table 3.** *Influence of Teacher Professional Development Activities*

<i><b>Influence of Professional Development Programs</b></i>	<u><b>SD</b></u>
Provided information that was new to me	1.40
Changed my view of teaching	1.48
Influenced me to seek out further information	1.42
Caused me to change my classroom practices	1.35

Note: n= 279 teachers and educational professionals.

Table 4 reveals teachers were also well supported in their professional development. Thirty eight percent received release time, while sixty eight percent received professional development time during their contract year. Over fifty percent received a stipend for professional development activities outside of the district, forty one percent were reimbursed for travel and twenty three percent received full or partial reimbursement for college tuition.

**Table 4.** Professional Development Support from School District

<i>Type of Professional Development Support</i>	%
Release time from teaching	38.3
Scheduled time in the contract year for professional development	68.1
Stipend for professional development activities outside regular work hours	53.4
Full or partial reimbursement of college tuition	23.6
Reimbursement for conference or workshop fees	32.9
Reimbursement for travel and/or daily expenses	41.2
Other support	15.0

Note: n= 279 teachers and educational professionals.

In this investigation, we explored teachers' perceptions of the district superintendent's instructional leadership and his/her role in developing and maintaining the instructional capacity of the school district. What degree do superintendents influence teachers' ability to produce worthwhile and substantial learning? The dependent variable for this study was teachers' perceptions of the district superintendent in fostering instructional capacity ( $\underline{M} = 4.87$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 1.22$ ). Descriptive statistics for the two independent variables, superintendent instructional leadership ( $\underline{M} = 4.89$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 1.35$ ), and teacher professional development and instructional practices ( $\underline{M} = 5.26$ ,  $\underline{SD} = .846$ ) were also calculated. Pearson product moment correlations were conducted and are presented in Table 5. Inspection of these correlation coefficients indicates moderate to high correlations among the three variables. For example, there were moderately strong correlations between superintendent instructional leadership and teacher professional development and instructional practice ( $r = .64$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as well as teachers' perceptions of the superintendent in fostering instructional capacity and teacher professional development and instructional practice ( $r = .66$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The data revealed a relatively high correlation between the instructional leadership of the superintendent and his/her role in fostering instructional capacity ( $r = .93$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Provided these findings, the two independent variables were examined for potential multicollinearity. Although there were moderate to high bivariate

intercorrelations, the tolerance values for all variables exceeded the 0.1 cutoff value. Additionally, all values for variance inflation factors (VIF) were safely below the “critical” value of 10. These results indicate that multicollinearity was not a problem with these variables (Pedhazur, 1997; Stevens, 1992).

**Table 5.** Means, Standard Deviations, Partial Correlation Coefficients, Reliabilities (on the diagonal) and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for Superintendent Instructional Leadership, Instructional Capacity and Teacher Professional Development and Instructional Practices.

	M	SD	1	2	VIF
Superintendent Instructional Leadership	4.89	1.35	.93	.64**	1.67
Teacher Professional Development and Instructional Practices	5.26	.84		.66**	1.67

Note: The dependent variable was held constant in this. \* $p = .05$ , \*\*  $p = .01$

The qualitative data were coded using constructs, or domains, initially examined in the quantitative data (Superintendent and Instructional Capacity, Superintendent’s Instructional Leadership, and Professional Development and Instructional Practice). Using Spradley’s (1979) domain analysis, the three domains were used as overarching cover terms that provide a framework to organize and analyze themes which were generated from qualitative data coding. The themes generated from the qualitative data analysis were compared to quantitative data using the same domain to analyze data across methodologies (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

### *Superintendent’s Role in Fostering Instructional Capacity*

The qualitative data focusing on the superintendent’s ability to foster instructional capacity had five cover terms utilized in Spradley’s (1979) domain analysis. The terms focused on dimensions of capacity that the superintendent could use to influence classroom achievement. They include: the superintendent’s vision and leadership, organizational structures and management, teacher collective commitment, access and use of professional knowledge, and resource allocation and management. To focus the data analysis, cover terms provided a framework to identify the relationship between the coded focus group data and the dimensions of instructional capacity.

*Vision and Leadership.* The superintendent’s vision and leadership focused on

the attributes of instructional capacity. Focus group members stated how they believed that they had a clear and articulated vision and mission focused not only on academic excellence, but also on a district wide push towards a student-centered focus. Two districts cited that the superintendent created a sense of purpose for teachers not only to focus on academics in the classroom, but also to sustain the effort throughout the year. Many of the teachers interviewed continually cited how the superintendent's vision trickled down from the district office to the faculty, then ultimately to the student. The vision focused on high academic achievement with some districts focusing on academics more than others, but all agree that the push was spearheaded by the superintendent's office.

*Organizational Structures and Management.* Organizational structures and management practices of the superintendent were also identified by focus group participants as critical factors that influence instructional capacity. The specific findings highlighted benchmarks for teacher evaluation of progress and creation of instructional experts. These two components were tied together by a semantic relationship of "means-end". In other words, teacher evaluations and the inclusion of instructional experts became a way to improve instruction and student achievement.

Teacher evaluations used by building administrators were seen as a critical component that superintendents used to reinforce their expectations for success through traditional management practices. Focus group members spoke of personnel restructuring and how the superintendent began creating and using instructional coaches, teacher leaders, MAP coordinators, and reading coordinators to facilitate improvement in classroom instruction. Through comprehensive evaluation policies focused on instruction and student achievement and creating new positions within the school district, superintendents focused on providing new levels of instructional support to classroom teachers. Superintendents in these districts linked structural changes to specific programs and policies designed to focus on classroom instructional capacity.

*Collective Teacher Commitment.* Another aspect of superintendents' influence on instructional capacity developed from the focus group data was the sense of a "collective commitment for student achievement" providing teachers with the opportunity to reflect and improve on instruction and their professional practice. Teachers cited how the "collective commitment" was developed through rewards for success and the ability to take instructional risks. These functions were used in the development of a collective commitment towards instructional improvement focused on student achievement.

The ability to take risks was highly touted by these teachers as having a significant influence on their commitment to their work and students. Superintendents allowed and encouraged teachers to take risks in classroom instruction. Professional development provided by the district pushed for new ideas in teaching and learning while controlling fear of disappointment, lack of confidence, and support for nontraditional teaching methods. The data also revealed that teachers perceived risk taking as beneficial and viewed it, in part, as an organizational climate fostered by the superintendent.

*Access to Knowledge.* Evidence from interviews indicated that superintendents in this study demonstrated strong instructional and transformational leadership qualities. Teachers suggested that superintendents made access to information easier. Teachers felt that this access nurtured instructional capacity because it allowed for new knowledge and skills to be shared, which in turn improved instructional practice. Participants stated how study groups and the creation of professional learning communities provided these opportunities, thereby changing significantly thoughts, ideas, and classroom practices around teaching and learning. This access to knowledge, provided by district leaders, created a means-ends relationship designed at improving teachers' attitudes and practices.

*Resource Management.* Both superintendents and teachers viewed the utilization of district resources as a critical factor in the superintendent's effort to produce substantial learning. Focus group participants cited how resources aligned themselves around two primary areas outside the classroom: funding and time. Time was cited as an important factor that influenced teachers' abilities to concentrate and reflect on instructional issues. In addition, while requiring more from teachers in the area of classroom instruction, superintendents used time more efficiently as to not overburden faculty with non-instructional related issues, thus protecting teacher time. Superintendents streamlined outdated policies and procedures to keep teachers from being outside the classroom while allocating more resources to instructionally focused activities and opportunities for teachers.

Teachers indicated that these resources included release time to read and conduct research, fulfilling district level responsibilities, and reflecting on classroom curriculum and pedagogy. Teachers described district leaders as allocating significant time and flexibility into the daily schedule thereby permitting teachers to work collaboratively and participate in various professional development opportunities. The superintendents in the study recognized that changes in policies and organizational structures were fundamental in fostering a district culture of

instructional and academic success for students.

Previous research has shown that funding for instructionally related resources is a cornerstone to academic reform in schools. Responses of these teachers indicated that funding support by the district office occurred in their attempts to become better teachers. For example, responses ranged from direct spending for classroom materials and equipment, to writing grants for strategic programs for student achievement. Teachers expressed a heightened awareness of resource allocation and influence these resources had on instruction in their classrooms.

*Instructional Capacity Framework.* By focusing on instructional capacity, superintendents who are characterized as instructional and transformational leaders seek to increase the success of both students and teachers within the classroom (O'day, et al., 1995). Instructional capacity is the interaction between teachers and students around educational materials in the classroom and is influenced by the capacity to produce worthwhile and substantial learning (Cohen and Ball, 1999). While all three elements included in instructional capacity are important (teachers, students, and classroom materials), no single element can be influenced without affecting the remaining parts.

Superintendents can significantly influence instructional capacity through teachers. Instructionally committed superintendents seek to shape how teachers apprehend, interpret, and respond to students and materials. In other words, superintendents challenge and expand teachers' knowledge, understanding of content, and student learning to shape instruction and evaluation in the classroom (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Because of the dynamic relationship contained in the instructional unit, superintendents may have an influence on classroom teachers, resources, and instructional materials, but limited influence on the instruction delivered to students. Therefore, superintendents must rely on the strength of teacher and material elements when attempting to improve and enhance students' learning.

*A Framework on Superintendent Influence on Instructional Capacity.* To conceptualize how and to what extent superintendents influence instructional capacity, a framework of findings was created. Reflecting on the tenets of instructional and transformational leadership, superintendents used these leadership styles to influence both teachers and materials within the instructional unit. Data collected through mixed methodology demonstrated that superintendents influence instructional capacity primarily through professional development and instructional practices of teachers. Also superintendents influenced instructional capacity by gathering,

aligning, and allocating instructional and institutional resources that significantly improved classroom achievement. The results of superintendents fostering an environment of instructional capacity demonstrated more highly committed and instructionally prepared teachers as well as higher academic achievement among students enrolled in these districts.

## **Conclusions**

Federal and state policy makers have concluded, right or wrong, that schools are in crisis and that one option for addressing this situation is reliance on federal mandates oriented at increasing educational outputs, especially those measured by standardized tests (Kowalski, 1999; Petersen & Young, 2004). Student achievement has become the political *coin-of-the-realm* and powerfully mandated external pressures for educational accountability and school improvement have become the political tools of choice. Policy makers routinely preface their actions with the mantra that success is defined by what students learn (Lashway, 2001).

Given the current emphasis on academic accountability, this investigation used the conceptual lenses of superintendent instructional leadership and instructional capacity to explore teachers' attitudes and opinions of superintendents' influence on their ability to produce worthwhile and substantial student learning. Although empirical investigations have demonstrated that the district superintendent has influence, student learning is also influenced by administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the board of education in focusing on the technical core of curriculum and instruction (Petersen, 2002). The components of instructional capacity suggest a number of challenges for school leaders and the leadership profession, including anchoring leaders' work and preparation in learning and teaching, promoting a distributed understanding of leadership, nurturing the development of social trust, and facilitating the development of professional networks (Spillane & Louis, 2001, p. 96). Results of this investigation provide empirical evidence about superintendents that may relate to leadership effectiveness in fostering the professional work, development, and practices of teachers; at least, as perceived by 279 teacher/school personnel surveys in seven non-randomly selected school districts in the Midwest. Results from this investigation led to two overarching conclusions.

### *Instructional Practices of Teachers*

First, data analysis supported a moderate to strong relationship between the three sets of variables that measure superintendent instructional leadership, instructional capacity and teacher professional development and instructional practices. Our analysis revealed that teachers in these districts attributed a moderate to high level of superintendent influence related to their ability to produce worthwhile and substantial learning. The presence of statistically significant correlational relationships between the variables of superintendents' instructional leadership, teacher professional development and instructional practices, and the dependent variable (instructional capacity) permit us to point to the relationship of these factors and their ability to impact the teaching and learning of children.

### *Instructional Leadership and Instructional Capacity*

Second, results point to the ability of the district superintendent to be influential in several areas related to the presence of instructional capacity. Teachers viewed the superintendent as influential in their professional development and instructional practices. Responses on the survey instrument clearly indicated that superintendents in these districts were perceived as responsible for resources that impacted classroom instructional practices and capacity, as models for professionalism focused on student achievement, changing teachers' assumptions, beliefs, and practices through professional development.

## **The Big "So What?"**

It requires very little effort to find previous conceptualizations of the heavy managerial and administrative role of the district superintendent in the school organization. Much of that work has continually begged the question of whether or not the highly political and conflict ridden world in which superintendents operate (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Thomas, 2001), the organizational structure of districts, be it urban or rural (Hess, 1999; Eaton & Sharp, 1996), the instability and turnover of the office of the superintendent (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992), superintendent and school board relations (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992; Iannaccone & Lutz 1994), and the ambiguity of educational outcomes (Hess, 1999; Thomas, 2001)

actually permit superintendents to aspire to the role of leader of curriculum and instruction. Clearly, some of this work implies that these issues in isolation or in concert impede superintendents from focusing adequate attention on the technical-core of curriculum and instruction. Others have also argued that the work of top-level administrators has no direct impact on student achievement (Zigarelli, 1996).

Yet, what makes the findings of this investigation so important is that they provide further empirical evidence to question the conventional wisdom regarding the role of the district superintendent in leading schools. Based on the data of this investigation, we suggest a changing leadership role for the district superintendent in the core-technology of curriculum and instruction. Emerging from the data were several critical themes demonstrating consistencies among these instructionally focused superintendents and their academically successful districts. These themes included modeling professional practice for teachers, staff and students. Results indicate that district leaders in this investigation articulated an instructionally focused mission and high expectations of teachers and staff. Superintendents were also seen for their management of resources and how efficient allocation of these resources, especially the scarce resource of time, permitted teachers to participate in professional development, work collaboratively, and improve their knowledge, skills and craft. Coupled with the notion of teacher professional learning, superintendents were viewed by teachers in these districts as enhancing their understanding and classroom practices. In offering opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and professional development to teachers in these districts, teachers were engaged in learning. Through this developed new instructional strategies directed at school improvement and classroom practice. Finally, teachers felt trusted and treated as professionals by the superintendents in these districts. A culture of trust permitted teachers to feel independent and comfortable in implementing their newly acquired skills and practices in their classrooms.

America's future is inextricably linked to the quality of its public schools, its P-12 educators, and the leadership of its superintendents (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005; Petersen & Short, 2001). Despite the crush of competing agendas, superintendents must position themselves to cultivate an ethos that enables teacher learning and professional development in order to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. Given the exploratory nature of this investigation, the classroom teacher and superintendent relationship should be considered a starting point in looking at the influence of the larger instructional unit [school district] on the instructional capacity of teachers. Although findings from this investigation have provided a

little clearer conceptualization of the changing role of the district superintendent (Kowalski, 2003; Petersen & Barnett, 2005), the study of the role of the superintendent in fostering instructional capacity at the classroom level is new and the process is not clearly understood. Clearly, superintendents in these districts do not deliver the day-to-day instruction and would not be expected to, yet evidence points to the fact that they do have a significant impact, albeit indirectly, on the teachers that do. It is through this dynamic that we see the influence of the superintendent's role as it gradually shifts from a comprehensive manager to an instructional leader focused on the individual classroom (McEwan, 1998).

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