Managing the Work of Leadership: An Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

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Because school principals are accountable to a broad array of stakeholders and impacted by
numerous reform efforts, principal workloads are reaching crisis levels. This study aims to
address four key questions about how principals manage their work, including the challenges and
frustrations they experience, strategies they use to overcome these challenges, adaptations they
make to increase the effectiveness of these strategies, and approaches to managing social aspects
of leadership work. These research questions are addressed through a qualitative multiple case
study design informed by Activity Theory. The *principal activity system* is defined as the unit of
analysis for each case, and *mediation* is suggested as a key concept for understanding how
various factors impact the work of principals. A broad definition of instructional leadership
work—inclusive of operations management work—is suggested for accurately understanding
what principals actually work on, and how their impact on student learning might be increased.

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Chapter 1: The Principal Workload Crisis and the Promise of Productivity

Introduction

The principalship has long been a focal point for nearly every substantive change in education policy. Practitioners, policymakers, and the public understand the crucial role school leaders play in improving learning outcomes for students. While principals are only one of the school-based factors influencing student achievement, their singular role at the top of the school hierarchy creates fierce competition for principals' time and attention. Because principals are accountable to a broad array of stakeholders—including students, parents, teachers, district administrators, community leaders, and national policymakers—principal workloads are reaching crisis levels. How principals manage their work, and strive to maximize their productivity, is a subject that has received little scholarly attention, but one rich with potential for improving principals' impact on student learning.

The Growing Demands of Accountability and the Teacher-Evaluation Workload

Perhaps the greatest source of additional work for principals in the past decade has been the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), which prompted many states to pass much more stringent teacher evaluation laws. Provisions of these state laws, such as "using more than two rating categories" (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2014, p. 2) have increased the complexity of the demands facing principals in the teacher evaluation process. While Race to the Top's competitive grant programs incentivized states to pass a flurry of new legislation affecting principal workloads, the increasing burden of staff evaluation can be traced back to the beginning of the contemporary accountability movement:

Personnel decisions have always been a major component of principals' work, and the

responsibility for evaluating teachers has grown more important with the increasing use

of standards-based assessments of teachers as a part of accountability systems and

alternative compensation plans. (Rice, 2010, p. 3)

According to professional associations, these heightened accountability demands are changing

the principalship in ways that are making the job more stressful and less manageable, even as the

initial wave of reform driven by No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) has

begun to fade. Rather than support principals in meeting the new challenges of accountability,

"the recent round of NCLB waivers prompted a rush to create new principal evaluation tools,

most of which emphasize test scores over capacity building" (NAESP & NASSP, 2013, p. 1). If

principals are to act entrepreneurially in response to these new demands (Portin, et al., 2009),

they need autonomy and influence to lead their schools' learning improvement agendas, but

often there is a "discrepancy between the level of accountability expected of principals and the

lack of influence they really have over many factors affecting school success" (NAESP &

NASSP, 2013, p. 6). Productivity remains one area in which principals may act

entrepreneurially—that is, they may "make decisions regarding the direction, operation, and

resources of the school" (Portin et al., 2009, p. 104) without seeking permission or additional

resources from district leaders—to increase their impact on student learning. While principals

may have a limited ability to decrease their workload or increase staffing—for example, by

hiring an additional assistant principal to share the workload of discipline or teacher supervision

and evaluation—principals do have some degree of control over how they spend their time. This

study aimed to explore how principals manage their work, including the factors that impede their

efficiency, the approaches principals use to overcome these barriers, and how they enlist others in the work of school leadership.

The Distributed Nature of Leadership Work

An additional challenge facing principals—and a challenge for researchers seeking to understand the work of leadership—is the increasingly distributed nature of school leadership. Whereas "school leader" was once synonymous with "principal," and classic portraits such as Wolcott (1973) characterized school leadership as residing in "*The man in the principal's office*," contemporary definitions are, appropriately, far broader. As I will show, teacher leaders, assistant principals, counselors, and office staff are routinely involved in the work of leadership, even if ultimate responsibility for that work rests on the principal's shoulders. This "distributed" aspect of leadership goes beyond simple delegation, in which the principal assigns tasks to subordinates; in the schools examined in this study, leadership involved multiple individuals working jointly to accomplish work on behalf of the school. Distributed leadership work places new demands on principals, and changes the nature of the work they do. This reality can only be properly understood with new conceptual tools.

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Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

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The purpose of this study is to explore principal productivity, defining the construct and exploring ways in which school principals respond to the demands of their leadership work. Principals may employ a wide variety of strategies to increase their productivity as leaders, and a deeper understanding of the nature and prevalence of these strategies is overdue. While the extant research literature on school leadership is immense, little attention has been paid to the nature of principal productivity.

While a more complete definition will be offered in Chapter 2, a basic assumption of this study is that productivity suggests the idea of accomplishing work with increasing efficiency—and thus, with less waste. This view is intentionally neutral toward the content or goals of principals' specific work tasks; while previous studies (e.g. Horng et al., 2010; Buttram, 2008) have distinguished between different categories of principal time use, such as "instructional leadership" and "facilities management," the present study considers productivity in efficiency terms, without regard for the specific purposes of the work principal choose to spend their time on. A deeper understanding of how principals manage their time and strive to complete their work efficiently could lead to the identification of common trends and patterns among principals, and ultimately to the identification of best practices for increasing principal productivity.

This study is among the first to draw on *Activity Theory* (Engeström, 1999; Kuutti, 1996) to examine the work of school leadership. While a number of studies have examined principal time use, and some (e.g. Turnbull et al., 2009) have addressed the role of delegation, the complex nature of school leadership work—and specifically its distributed nature—presents challenges to accurately understanding the work of principals in purely individualistic terms. By clearly bounding a more appropriate unit of analysis—the *activity system*—Activity Theory adds important conceptual tools to this investigation, and thus bypasses the pitfall of merely documenting what principals do and assigning each task or unit of time to a category. By understanding the interactions between the many complex and interrelated actions principals take each day, we can generate a much richer and more accurate portrait of how principals actually work, and can start to identify strategies for increasing their productivity.

This study aims to address four primary research questions:

1. What are the common sources of frustration or barriers to principal productivity? In other words, what reduces principals' efficiency in accomplishing the work of school leadership?

2. What strategies, techniques, and tools do principals identify as helpful for accomplishing their work in an efficient manner?

3. How do principals identify, adapt, and use these strategies, techniques, and tools to complete their work with increasing efficiency?

4. How do principals negotiate and manage the explicit and implicit division of labor, as well as the social rules and interpersonal norms that impact how people work together, in order to ensure the efficient execution of the work of leadership by all involved?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To frame this inquiry into how principals manage their leadership work, this chapter reviews the literature on the impact of school leadership on student learning, the nature of principal decision-making, and the tension between "leadership" and "management" work visible in much of the research on principal workload management. The distributed nature of school leadership and the interrelationships between instructional and managerial work are discussed, with particular attention to the limitations of time-use studies. Activity Theory and Wenger's (1998) conception of communities of practice are offered as helpful frameworks for designing inquiries into the nature of school leaders' productivity practices.

The Impact of Leadership on Student Learning

A growing body of research, most notably that by Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, and their colleagues (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010) has demonstrated convincingly that school leadership has a substantial impact on student learning. Among all the school-based factors influencing student learning, leadership is second only to classroom teaching, and in low-performing schools, leadership can have an even greater impact in improving learning outcomes for all students (Leithwood, et al., 2004). In their 2010 final report from the Learning from Leadership Project, Louis et al. conclude that leadership "explains five to seven percent of the variation in student learning across schools" which amounts to "one quarter of the total across-school variation" (2010, p. 8). This large effect suggests that efforts to improve leadership offer potentially powerful levers for improving student learning. In the following sections, I will address a number of important dimensions of school leadership, both within and beyond the principalship.

Decision-Making: How Do Principals Decide What to Work On?

At the heart of the work of leadership is decision-making in all its forms, from allocating resources to setting directions and goals for the organization. Mintzberg emphasizes this point: "Probably the most crucial part of the manager's work—the part that justifies his [sic] great authority and his powerful access to information—is that performed in his decisional roles" (1973, p. 77).

Decision-making is a key function of school leaders because they have both the information and the responsibility to make decisions that must be accepted and committed to by the entire staff. While recognizing the value of sharing decision-making power throughout every level of an organization, Leithwood et al. note that "it is important for other functions to be carried out at a particular level. For example, it seems critical that leaders in formal positions of authority retain responsibility for building a shared vision for their organizations" (2004, p. 7).

The complex and distributed nature of leadership creates for leaders a situation in which they cannot and need not perform all leadership functions personally. This creates the need to make decisions about what work to focus on personally, what to delegate to others, and what to ignore completely. A key decision principals constantly face, then, is how to spend their time. These decisions have powerful implications for student learning: "Leaders' contributions to student learning, then, depend a great deal on their judicious choice of what parts of their organization to spend time and attention on. Some choices…will pay off much more than others" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 13). It is not surprising, then, that many researchers have attempted to identify the most important types of issues for principals to address. In one study, researchers found that effective principals spend time "developing the school's vision, gathering research information, and then applying it to the local setting" (Louis et al., 2010, p. 84). In other studies,

researchers have highlighted the importance of managing operational issues to ensure that teachers can work without disruption (Grissom & Loeb, 2010). The choices a principal makes about how to spend her time have enormous implications for the school's improvement trajectory. What shapes these choices?

First, the specific activities that principals choose to spend their time on may reflect their sense of *efficacy*. Rice notes that "the effectiveness of principals depends, in part, on their sense of efficacy on particular kinds of tasks and how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities." (Rice, 2010, p. 2). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) note that "self efficacy has a significant impact on goal-setting, level of aspiration, effort, adaptability, and persistence" and that "these beliefs affect the development of functional leadership strategies and the skillful execution of those strategies" (2004, p. 573). Turnbull et al. (2009) noted that participants in the School Administration Manager (SAM) project, a major initiative to refocus principal time use on instructional leadership activities, "had been encouraged by SAM project staff to focus on descriptor tasks they were good at" (p. 43). We might expect, then, that principals will choose to spend more of their time on activities at which they feel a higher degree of efficacy. This may help explain the discovery of Horng et al. that organizational management efforts have a larger impact than instruction-focused efforts (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010): According to Grissom & Loeb (2010), principals report a higher degree of self-efficacy in organizational management tasks than in instructional leadership tasks. Efforts to address principal decision-making around time use, then, must take efficacy into account.

A second factor in decision making is principals' capacity to complete various kinds of work *efficiently*. Principals may have little incentive to delegate tasks that they can personally complete efficiently, whereas they may find it worth the trouble to delegate time-consuming

tasks that they do not consider efficient. For example, principals' choices about delegating the completion of state reports, as discussed in Chapter 6, seemed to be related to their own and others' relative efficiency in completing these reports. Efficiency and efficacy may tend to go hand-in-hand, but efficiency also has the potential to obviate some time-allocation decisions. For example, a principal who can provide detailed written feedback very quickly using an electronic application may not have to choose between supervising students and observing instruction, because efficient practices may make time available for both. Conversely, principals who are inefficient at their work will face much starker choices between competing priorities. More powerful technologies and productivity strategies have the potential to allow principals to accomplish more of their priorities in the available time.

Another factor in principal time use decisions is the *expectations* of their various constituencies. Rather than allocate their time based solely on a rational calculation of what most needs to be accomplished to achieve certain goals—what March & Heath call a *logic of consequence* (1994, p. 2), we might expect that principals also respond to pressure—real or perceived—from stakeholders such as district leaders, teachers, parents, students, and policymakers. March & Heath (1994) describe this second heuristic as a *logic of appropriateness* (1994, p. 101). The *logic of appropriateness* "makes great demands on the abilities of individuals and institutions to learn from the past and to form useful identities" (March & Heath, 1994, p. 101). Mintzberg (1973) highlights the considerable pressure on managers to serve as figureheads, which requires their involvement in all manner of seemingly irrelevant issues to convey the importance of the issue, to meet legal requirements, or simply because it is expected. These duties serve to strengthen relationships with internal and external constituents, which may prove valuable in the subsequent pursuit of more focused goals—for example, speaking at a Rotary

Club meeting may help a principal later raise support in the community for a bond issue. Because of the importance of these constituencies, efforts to discourage principals from working on non-instructional tasks may backfire if implemented without a thorough understanding of how context-specific pressures impact principals' decisions. For example, principals in schools with no assistant principal may spend time on tasks related to operations management in order to respond to pressure from school-based stakeholders, whereas district, state, and federal stakeholders may prefer that principals focus on improvement-related tasks. In schools with assistant principals who can take on operations management tasks, we may find different patterns. This variability is reflected in the principal time use studies discussed below.

In order to explore these context-dependent factors, we need a more robust conceptual framework; a rationalized view of principal decision-making is inadequate. For example, skepticism that principals make decisions about how to spend their time based primarily on professional standards such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) is amply warranted. Nor can we expect principals to spend their time on "instructional leadership" tasks rather than mere "management" tasks, a false dichotomy I will address below that appears in such important studies as Turnbull et al. (2009). March and Heath (1994) note that theories of rational choice are "deceptively comprehensible and self-evident," but that theories of bounded or limited rationality are "more consistent with observations of how decisions actually happen" (p. 1):

> Studies of decision making in the real world suggest that not all alternatives are known, that not all consequences are considered, and that not all preferences are evoked at the same time. (p. 8)

I will argue that school principals work under conflicting pressures in complex social environments that thwart attempts to use reductive heuristics to analyze their time-use decisions. March and Heath note that these "interactions make understanding and evaluating learning in a system of social institutions considerably more difficult than it would be in a simpler world" (1994, p. 96). Below I will attempt to apply *Activity Theory* to the complex relationships that influence principal decision making, because it considers context more thoroughly than perspectives that address only the individual decision maker:

> To be able to analyze such complex interactions and relationships, a theoretical account of the constitutive elements of the system under investigation is needed. In other words, there is a demand for a new unit of analysis. Activity theory has a strong candidate for such a unit of analysis in the concept of *object-oriented, collective,* and *culturally mediated human activity*, or *activity system*. Minimum elements of this system include the object, subject, mediating artifacts (signs and tools), rules, community, and division of labor. (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999, p. 9)

This activity system is represented visually in Figure 1 and Figure 2, and discussed at length below.

Instructional Leadership and Mere Management: A False Dichotomy

School leaders have a complex and changing array of responsibilities, which are so varied and demanding as to be realistic only for a mythical "superprincipal" (Copland, 2001). To bring coherence and focus to the role, the term "instructional leadership" has become shorthand for the "real" work of school administrators. Yet Leithwood et al. note that "the term 'instructional leader' has been in vogue for decades as the desired model…yet the term is often more a slogan than a well-defined set of leadership practices" (Leithwood, et al., 2004, p. 6). In practice, the

emphasis on instructional leadership is often more an attempt to de-emphasize the myriad managerial duties of principals than a true attempt to increase their capacity and performance as leaders of instructional improvement. Turnbull et al. (2009), in an evaluation of the School Administration Manager Project, noted that principals in the study were unclear about what, precisely, "instructional leadership" is:

> Although a vast majority of participating principals wanted to be instructional leaders, few articulated a vision of what an instructional leader does or which activities would be the highest priorities. Participating principals bought into the notion that they should spend more time on instruction, but it was not clear that many came to confident conclusions about what to do with that time. (p. 42)

Surprisingly, the SAM Project attempted to shift managerial duties to other staff without investing in the instructional leadership capacity of principals, a shortcoming noted in Turnbull et al. (2009):

> Although participating principals welcomed the chance to spend more time in classrooms, our interviews suggested that more could be done to support principals in deepening their repertoire of leadership skills. … Only in a few sites did we find that the principal had strategically selected a set of high-leverage leadership activities that would serve specific purposes in instructional improvement. (p. iv)

As I will demonstrate below, this distinction between the merely "managerial" work of principals and the true "leadership" work is largely artificial, and masks important relationships between leadership actions and school outcomes. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing that the complexity of the principalship cannot be reduced by fiat or semantics, and more recent studies (Horng et al., 2010; Grissom & Loeb, 2011) acknowledge the central importance of organization

management work in the success of principals and their schools. The challenge of understanding how "leadership" and "management" work is distributed in schools calls for a robust model that accurately maps the relationships among people and tasks.

Broader Definitions of School Leadership

While some views of school leadership are too narrow, others are too broad; for example, Leithwood et al. (2004) identify three basic practices central to school leadership: Setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. This framework encompasses an enormous range of responsibilities and tasks in its simple categories, and it is worth considering more specific delineations of the work of leaders.

In his 1973 volume *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Henry Mintzberg outlines ten working roles that describe the day-to-day work of managers of all kinds, and argues that the role of the manager is remarkably similar across sectors and levels. While the word "manager" is seldom used positively to refer to school administrators today, Mintzberg's ten roles concisely and comprehensively describe the day-to-day work of school leaders. (In today's parlance, the term "managerial" has been replaced by "leadership," and the term "non-managerial" has been replaced by "managerial," which reflects an increasingly negative attitude toward management and a desire to emphasize the "higher" aspects of leaders' work. With this semantic shift in mind, Mintzberg's analysis remains salient today.) Categorizing the roles as *interpersonal* (figurehead, leader, liaison), *informational* (monitor, disseminator, spokesman), and *decisional* (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, negotiator), Mintzberg takes the view that the work of managers should not be arbitrarily divided into managerial and non-managerial categories. Instead, he argues, apparently non-managerial tasks that managers engage in should be included in our definition of managerial work, "even when ostensibly part of the regular operations of

their organizations" (Mintzberg, 1973). In other words, if managers engage in a particular type of work, that work is *by definition* managerial work (or in today's preferred terminology, leadership work).

Subsequent decades of research have borne out the importance of work that goes beyond the narrow confines of traditional "instructional leadership." Grissom and Loeb (2011) lament the lack of scholarly attention to the managerial role principals play, noting that "the dominance of instructional leadership as the primary frame for understanding the job of the principal has, to some extent, crowded out the study of other aspects of principal work" (p. 2). In an ambitious study linking principal self-assessments of task effectiveness—a measure of efficacy—to school outcomes, Grissom and Loeb found that "principals' effectiveness on organization management tasks consistently predict greater school performance," yet did not find "positive associations between school outcomes and efficacy in instruction management" (2011, p. 31). Portin et al. (2009) note that a "constant tension exists between what these leaders view as 'operational' matters and their instructional leadership activities" (p. 38); however, this tension is not a direct tension between mutually exclusive categories of work, but rather a feature of the inherent complexity of school leadership:

> Even when handled smoothly or responsively, these [operational] matters could distract greatly from the instructional improvement work of the school, at least the work that designated administrators could do. The school leaders who understood this and found ways to treat operational matters as an instructionally related decision were able to provide an additional and welcome support for teaching and learning… (p. 40)

While not dismissing the importance of instructional leadership, Grissom and Loeb note that their "findings do argue against narrowing the principal's focus to *only* overseeing day-to-day

instructional practices and observing teachers in classrooms at the expense of managing key organizational functions, such as budgeting and maintaining campus facilities" (2011, p. 29). Redefining instructional leadership to *include* organizational management tasks, they conclude that

> effective instructional leadership combines an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, provide them with the opportunities they need to improve, and keep the school running smoothly. (p. 29).

Thus we see an increasing recognition of the reality Mintzberg highlighted in the 1970s: we must view *what leaders actually do* as the work of leadership, rather than impose a preconceived definition that excludes certain categories of work.

This broader definition of the work of school leadership is supported by Louis et al. (2010), who found that "school leaders have an impact on student achievement primarily through their influence on teachers' motivation and working conditions; their influence on teachers' knowledge and skills produces less impact on student achievement" (p. 19). Grissom and Loeb (2011) take a more pointed stance, arguing that "Principals devoting significant energy to becoming instructional leaders—in the narrow sense—are unlikely to see school improvement unless they increase their capacity for Organization Management as well" (p. 29).

A broader definition of school leadership should not just encompass the full range of *principals'* activities, though; as I will now argue, it must also address and articulate the relationships between other sources of leadership in schools.

Shared Leadership and the School's Improvement Agenda

Whether instructional leadership and organizational management are truly in tension, or are two sides of the same coin, both appear to be essential for learning improvement (Louis, et al., 2010). Portin et al. (2009) describe a core function of leaders as "guiding and participating in a process of creating the school's own learning improvement agenda, and then doing what they could, along with their colleagues, to realize that agenda" (p. 50). Indeed, pursuing an agenda for improvement is a job too big for a single leader (Portin, et al., 2009). This distributed or shared quality of the work of instructional improvement is worthy of special examination.

In the 1990s, widespread efforts were made to reduce the hierarchical nature of school leadership by putting into place structures for more democratic and participative school governance. Yet as Leithwood et al. note, "considerable empirical evidence suggests, however, that by itself it has made a disappointing contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning" (2004, p. 52). Simply shifting the bulk of decision-making to site-based teams may waste their time with decisions that should be made by administrators. Instead, teacher-leaders should be involved in the development and execution of an agenda for learning improvement (Portin, et al., 2009), and should be given decision-making authority over substantive issues of teaching and learning. Leithwood et al. note that "evidence suggests that teachers usually have the strongest desire to participate in decisions that most directly affect their work in the classroom, showing less need for involvement in policy or organizational decisions. This evidence also suggests that the most beneficial consequences of participation are achieved when teachers feel neither deprived nor saturated with opportunities for decisional participation" (2004, p. 53).

More recent efforts have gone beyond governance changes, and research has explored what is variously termed *shared*, *collective*, or *distributed* leadership. While an in-depth review of the varied definitions of these types of leadership is beyond the scope of this study, two points about the distribution of leadership in schools are worthy of special note now, and I will add an additional layer to this discussion later in my treatment of Activity Theory and communities of practice.

First, Wahlstrom et al. found that "principals and district leaders exercise the most influence on decisions. However, they do not lose influence as others gain it. In other words, influence in schools is not a fixed sum or a zero-sum game. Collective leadership occurs, in part, because effective principals encourage others to join in" (Wahlstrom, et al., 2010, p. 8). Other scholars recognize that instructional leadership is inherently distributed among staff, not just shared when the principal chooses to share it (Portin, et al., 2009). Rather than attempt to hoard power, principals should acknowledge and encourage the broader exercise of leadership; as Wahlstrom notes, this actually tends to increase principals' influence rather than diminish it. Second, this distribution of influence is not the kind of divide-and-conquer approach a school might take to assigning yard duty or cleaning the staff lounge; on the contrary, shared leadership is "contingent upon the task, the time required, and the expertise needed" (Wahlstrom, et al., 2010, p. 7). In other words, skillful leaders draw upon the full range of leadership skills present among their staff to deal with the varied and context-specific challenges faced in the process of educating their students. As I will discuss below, this context-specific and distributed nature of leadership work has important implications for how the work of principals can be studied; in particular, it imposes limitations on the value of time-allocation studies such as Buttram's

(2008). I will draw on Activity Theory and Wenger's conception of *communities of practice* to further elucidate these issues.

Gaps in Existing Research

Given the nature of school leadership as I have described it above, and its importance for student learning, principal productivity deserves greater scholarly attention. Several gaps in the in the literature on effective school leadership inform my research interests.

First, the concept of "productivity," while widely understood and discussed in popular culture and professional self-help literature (e.g. Allen, 2001), has received very little empirical treatment. The research that has been done focuses heavily on human-computer interaction and software design (e.g. Nardi, 1996), and has rarely focused on managers of any type, much less school leaders. Gonzalez (2006), who studied office workers in a variety of roles, found that many characteristics of information work resemble those of managerial work, as described in Mintzberg's (1973) study—namely, "fast pace of execution, variety of content, brevity, the fragmentation of work and interactions required" (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 23). Gonzalez' definition of information workers, like Drucker's (1993), includes managers (Gonzalez, 2006, p. xvii), and thus is certainly applicable to school leaders.

Heylighen and Vidal (2008) are among the few scholars who have turned their attention to the issue of personal productivity. They apply principles of cognitive psychology to examine David Allen's popular business and self-help book *Getting Things Done* (Allen, 2001), and make several important points about the concept of productivity. First, they note that Herbert Simon's notion of *satisficing*, made necessary by *bounded rationality*, does not go far enough in explaining the gap between the idealized pursuit of objectives and the actual behavior of information workers. Instead, they argue, modern conceptions of productivity such as Allen's

seek to "minimize stress and anxiety while maximizing productivity—but in the sense of maximizing the number of useful tasks performed, rather than of maximally achieving a given objective" (Heylighen & Vidal, 2008, p. 587). In other words, it is helpful to examine the productivity of an information worker not in terms of progress toward a fixed objective, but in terms of meaningful work accomplished in the available time. This facilitates the study of individuals who are working toward different objectives, which Heylighen and Vidal argue is essential because Allen's approach "is independent of any specific goals or values, as these are chosen by the individuals performing the actions." Instead, "the implicit value is to maximize productivity, i.e. to do more (tasks) with less (time, effort, resources)" (Heylighen and Vidal, 2008, p. 587). While it might be tempting to examine principal productivity in terms of the work of "instructional leadership," attempts to characterize instructional leadership as the "real" work of principals are misguided to the extent that they do not reflect what principals actually do, as I have argued above. In fact, as I will show below, determining what precisely a principal is working on at a given time is actually quite difficult. With Heylighen and Vidal, then, I will argue for an agnostic view of the object or aim of principals' productivity efforts; at the risk of tautology, a principal's work is whatever the principal is actually working on, and productivity means accomplishing that work more efficiently—that is, with less time or effort. This concern for reducing waste becomes especially salient when considering issues of delegation; with a properly bounded unit of analysis—the activity system—we can understand how principals strive to increase not just their own efficiency, but the efficiency of all who participate in their leadership work.

Second, existing studies of the work principals do (Buttram, 2008; Horng, et al., 2010) tend to focus on the allocation of time to various categories of work, and thus tend to yield little

in the way of helpful insights about what principals might do to accomplish more work in less time. While decision making and time allocation are certainly important topics, these studies treat principals' work output as a linear function of their time allocation, which ignores the potential efficiency gains that could be achieved through the use of particular tools and strategies.

Third, "time use" is an imperfect unit of analysis for principals' work, because it focuses only on the behavior of one individual, and ignores the social context and socially negotiated meaning of that behavior. Principals may devote a great deal of time to seemingly unimportant issues that are in fact of great importance in ways that researchers fail to recognize. For example, attending sporting events, as most high school administrators do, serves no direct instructional purpose and would be classified as mere "managerial" work in these studies—although Buttram (2008, p. 5) lists "student supervision" under both the "instruction" and "management" categories. In addition, some work has greater leverage than other work; strategic administrators may accomplish a great deal of important work with a minimal investment of time. For example, hiring the right person into a new position may require a small, one-time investment of the principal's time, yet result in dramatic improvements in the school over a period of many years. Time-use studies have no way of documenting these effects. In order to properly understand the work of school leaders, it is essential to go beyond allocation and look more broadly at the social and organizational context of their work. Engeström et al. note the dangers in ignoring this broader context:

> When the individual action is the privileged unit of analysis, collective practice can only
> be added on as a more or less external envelope. Human conduct tends to appear as a
> string of goal-directed acts of rational actors. This leads to difficulties in analysis of the

irrational aspects of actions and, more generally, of relationships between collective

motives and individual goals. (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999, p. 11-12)

As in the examples above, principals' "irrational" actions may in fact be critical to successful

leadership, and we need research tools that can properly frame these actions, particularly as they

have been encoded into the organization's "rules" for accomplishing its work. As March and

Heath note, learning that results from experience becomes encoded into "rules" governing

interaction:

> The interactions among the lessons of learning are further complicated by interactions
>
> among learning decision makers. Each decision maker adapts to an environment
>
> comprising other learning decision makers, each embedded in organizations of
>
> interacting learning individuals and subgroups. Thus the dynamics of rule change cannot
>
> be understood simply by focusing on the development of rules by a single decision maker
>
> or decision making institution. The outcomes for any particular action depend on what
>
> other decision makers do. (March & Heath, 1994, p. 97)

Fourth, given the enormous range of actions and activities that fill a principal's day, the

process of sorting everything a principal does into discrete categories inevitably obscures the

social complexities and multiple purposes of activities. While we might be surprised to learn that

spending time on instructional leadership activities is negatively correlated with student

achievement (Horng, et al., 2010), in practice it is hard to assign a single category to every action

a principal takes, and attempting to do so can obfuscate important patterns. Activities such as

"supervising students" or "planning professional development" may fulfill more than one

purpose, and even describing what a principal is doing in concrete behavioral terms does not

solve the problem. In two of the studies referenced here (Horng et al., 2010; Turnbull et al.,

2009), data collection protocols required that each behavior observed be coded to only one category, treating the application of multiple categories to a single behavior as a coding error, not as a reflection of the multifaceted nature of principals' work: "As much as we attempted to make the task codes clear and objective and to intensively train observers, there is still room for subjectively differing interpretations" (Horng, et al., 2010). Given this shortcoming, new research that can account for the complexity of principals' work is needed.

Fifth, atomistic approaches to analyzing principals' time use draw an arbitrary distinction between instructional and non-instructional activities, and more holistic approaches are sorely needed. Too often, instructional leadership work is seen as principals' "real" work, while other "management" duties are seen as a distraction which should be eliminated to the greatest extent possible—indeed, this was the premise of the School Administration Manager Project (Turnbull et al., 2009). This reflects a long-standing lack of clarity in the literature as to the definition of instructional leadership; as Leithwood & Jantzi note, the term allows "a great many different people to agree on the same thing without ever having to sort out whether everyone sees the alligator" (2008, p. 72). Mintzberg, on the other hand, notes that the ten managerial roles he describes are comprehensive, but "some activities may be accounted for by more than one role" (1973, p. 57), a caveat that certainly applies to the work of principals. Research examining school leaders' work must account for what principals actually do, and avoid arbitrarily excluding certain categories of work.

If principals are to increase their impact on student learning, certainly the allocation of time to particular areas of focus is an important issue, but these areas matter because of their specific, negotiated meaning in a particular context (Wenger, 1998), not because some categories are more "important" than others in the aggregate. For example, it may be immensely important

for a particular principal to attend a specific social gathering held by a parent group, but for entirely idiosyncratic, context-dependent reasons; it would be unreasonable to expect a generic category such as "principal attendance at parent social gatherings" to appear as a statistically significant factor in student learning outcomes. According to Activity Theory, which I will describe below, "activity is the minimal meaningful context for understanding individual actions" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 28), so looking simply at what actions a principal is engaged in at a given moment provides limited information.

Sixth, there has been very little conceptual work framing issues related to principal productivity. While Peter Drucker's (1993) concept of "knowledge worker" productivity has received ample attention in the business literature, we have few conceptual tools on which to base examinations of the strategies knowledge workers actually employ to increase their productivity. My work builds on Gonzalez' application of Activity Theory to productivity (Gonzalez, 2006), highlighting the relationships between the individual (subject), community (other staff), and various tasks (objects) pursued to advance school goals (outcomes). These relationships can also be viewed productively through the framework of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), which I will also examine below. I also draw on Mintzberg's (1973) characterization of the nature of managerial work, framing what principals do not as pure instructional leadership, but as the fulfillment of a wide range of roles under a variety of pressures common to managers.

Limitations of Time Use Studies

Given the importance of principals in influencing school climate, teaching quality, and ultimately student learning (Louis, et al., 2010), it is understandable that many efforts have been made to increase the impact of principals' work. I categorize these efforts under several broad

headings. First is the *effectiveness* approach, exemplified in the 1980s by the research of Ron Edmonds, and in recent years by the work of Robert Marzano and his colleagues, that seeks to discover which leadership behaviors or actions have the greatest positive impact (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). This literature is immense, and reviewing it is beyond the scope of my argument here; obviously it is of great importance that principals choose leadership actions that will be effective in accomplishing their goals, and avoid actions that will be counterproductive or detract from these goals. Second is the *time allocation* approach, which emphasizes the way principals spend their time; this approach assumes that principals should spend more time on the most important categories of leadership actions, and less time on work that could be eliminated or delegated to others. For example, the School Administration Manager (SAM) project attempted to shift building-management tasks from the principal to another designated staff member in order to leave more time for the principal to engage in instructional leadership work (Turnbull et al., 2009). Third is the *efficiency* approach, which emphasizes *how* principals do their work, in order to maximize their accomplishments in the available time; it is the aim of my research to further develop our understanding of principal productivity.

Each approach makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the nature of principals' work and how it might be improved: the *effectiveness* approach considers the actions principals should be engaged in; the *allocation* approach emphasizes the importance of prioritization and delegation; and the *efficiency* approach addresses how principals manage their workload and strive to accomplish more in the available time. Put differently, these approaches address, respectively, what principals should strive to accomplish, what principals should *not* spend their time on, and how principals can manage to get more done. Many of the studies cited here are descriptive in nature and avoid taking a pointed stance on what specifically principals

should do, though there appears to be an underlying belief among researchers that "instructional leadership," vaguely construed, is important, yet not at the expense of competent organizational management—an issue I have addressed at length above.

Recent research on principal time use has focused on the *allocation* of time to specific areas of responsibility or task categories. Two notable quantitative studies are Horng et al. (2010) and Buttram (2008), both of which collected data by shadowing a number of principals and categorizing their time use at fixed intervals. One strength of this approach is that it does not rely on self-reported behavior, but instead on the observations of trained data collectors. This approach allows these studies to provide important quantitative data on the gap between the espoused belief that principals should be strong instructional leaders, and the reality that principals spend much of their time on non-instructional matters. As Horng et al. note, "Self-report research, usually conducted with surveys, allows for large samples but often sacrifices depth and perhaps accuracy" (Horng, et al., 2010, p. 492), and ethnographic studies such as that of Wolcott (1973) are not generalizable and do not allow researchers to examine the link between principal time allocation and school outcomes, such as student test scores.

Horng et al. examined both *what* principals spent their time doing and *where* they spent their time, and unsurprisingly, a fairly small proportion of principals' time—about 12.6%—was devoted directly to instructional matters, and a large portion of the day was typically spent in the office—about 63%—versus about 8% in classrooms (2010, p. 502). This reinforces the common perception that instructional leadership is one of many priorities competing for principals' time (Copland, 2001), and that administrative work often takes precedence over instruction-focused work. Horng et al. found that principals of lower-performing schools spent more time on administration tasks, whereas principals in higher-performing schools spent more time on

"organization management" (Horng, et al., 2010, p. 511). More surprising was their finding that "day-to-day instruction activities are marginally or not at all related to improvements in student performance" (p. 519). The authors note that it is difficult to determine whether these relationships are causal, and if so, in which direction the causality runs; for example, time spent on administration tasks may simply serve as a proxy for disorder in the school environment or a lack of experience on the part of the principal (p. 509). Tellingly, the researchers found that

> principal's [sic] time spent on day-to-day instruction tasks is a significant and positive predictor of student performance until we control for past performance. This suggests that, while time spent on day-to-day instruction tasks is associated with high-performing schools, it is not necessarily associated with improving schools. (Horng, et al., 2010, p. 512)

In other words, principals in high-performing schools tend to devote more time to instructional leadership, but this may be more a consequence than a cause of the school's high performance. Improving schools, in contrast, have principals who spend more time on organization management activities. As Grissom and Loeb note, "increasing the principal's focus narrowly on overseeing instruction and observing teachers in classrooms at the expense of managing key organizational functions" is unlikely to lead to improved outcomes (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

There is some evidence, however, that the limited impact of principals' direct instructional work with teachers is simply due to its rarity or its poor quality. Louis et al. report that even the high-performing principals in their study "gave teachers specific ideas about how to improve instruction less than 3 times per year, on average" (Louis, et al., 2010, p. 85). To adapt a phrase from G.K. Chesterton, perhaps the instructional leadership ideal has not been tried and

found wanting, but has been found difficult and left untried. I will take up this argument again in my review of the School Administration Manager Project below.

Buttram (2008) examined the time use of five middle school principals, four high school principals, and two charter school principals. While Horng et al. used a coding system of twenty-five categories spread across six aggregate task categories, Buttram collected 25 codes into just three categories: instruction, management, and personal (2008, p. 4). However, Buttram notes that "Eight of the instruction and management sub-categories overlapped, indicating that a particular activity could have either an instructional or management focus" (2008, p. 4). Curiously, while Horng et al. go to great lengths to isolate variables such as school demographic characteristics, they make no attempt to address the potential overlap in task categories; even though more than 18 percent of observations did not fit into any of the six categories (p. 502), observations that were coded differently by different observers were treated as errors rather than indications of the complex and multifaceted nature of principals' work (Horng, et al., 2010, p. 497). I will address this critical oversight below. Both studies discuss the challenges facing school leaders who want to devote greater attention to instructional leadership, and Buttram argues that "it is vital to leverage the leadership behaviors most likely to pay off in student achievement" (2008, p. 3). However, as I have noted above, there is limited evidence that instructional leadership tasks fit the bill. Horng et al. note that "a single-minded focus on principals as instructional leaders operationalized through direct contact with teachers…may be detrimental if it forsakes the important role of principals as organizational leaders" (2010, p. 520).

While the time-use studies referenced above attempted only to examine how principals spent their time, other projects have attempted to influence principal time use patterns. The

National SAM (School Administration Manager) Project is an ambitious effort by The Wallace Foundation and participating state and local organizations to reorient principals' time use toward instructional leadership work rather than management work. (In light of the findings of Horng et al. (2010) and Grissom and Loeb (2011), this may be a questionable premise, but the SAM project predates those studies by several years.) The project aimed to achieve this reorientation through the assignment of responsibility for management tasks to a "School Administration Manager," though the precise duties of this person varied widely in the schools studied.

It is understandable why an effort such as the SAM project would appeal to administrators. As the professional associations NAESP and NASSP describe the situation,

> Many principals feel that they have multiple, often-conflicting priorities and that not everything can always be done well. They have multiple constituencies—students, teachers, parents, school board members, and superintendents—and feel that they are always on call and must respond to the needs of those groups. Time is fragmented; principals speak of the intense effort needed to find time to focus on important issues when there are myriad administrative tasks that must be done. Often, they feel that the leadership aspect of the job is shortchanged. (NAESP & NASSP, 2013)

By assigning responsibilities to a SAM, it follows that principals should be able to devote more time to instructional matters. However, the results of the project are disappointing in several respects due to significant design flaws, which I will outline below.

First, the SAM "innovation" was implemented without any professional development for school leaders on substantive issues such as instructional leadership or the supervision of teaching and learning; the training sessions focused only on how to follow data collection

protocols and tools. The project evaluators note that "more could be done to support principals in deepening their repertoire of leadership skills" (Turnbull et al., 2009, p. iv)—which is an understatement for a project so vast and costly. There is little point in reorienting principal time use away from certain activities without corresponding attention to what principals should be working on instead.

Second, the SAM sites varied widely in how they implemented the innovation, limiting the degree to which it could be evaluated as a replicable improvement strategy (Turnbull et al., 2009, p. vi). For example, some participating schools hired non-educators to serve as SAMs, others hired teachers interested in a career in administration, and others simply assigned the SAM role to an existing staff member such as a secretary, without relieving him or her of existing duties (Turnbull et al., 2009, p. 2).

Third, each SAM was urged to direct principal attention to issues of instructional leadership and discourage the use of time for management tasks, but subsequent research (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Horng, et al., 2010) calls this approach into question. Grissom and Loeb argue for a "broad view of instructional leadership that includes general organizational management skills as a key complement to the work of supporting curriculum and instruction" (2011, p. 1). If principals delegate to SAMs work that is best done by principals, simply because it is non-instructional, the results are unlikely to be satisfactory, as I have argued above.

Like the principal time-use studies (Buttram, 2008; Horng, et al., 2010), the SAM project attempted to categorize principals' time use based on instructional and managerial descriptors, with a view toward increasing time spent on "instructional leadership" tasks at the expense of "management" work. As Mintzberg (1973) notes, the work of managers such as principals cannot be arbitrarily divided into "real" work and peripheral work. He writes, "There has been a

tendency in the literature to exclude certain work that managers do as inherently nonmanagerial"
(p. 57), and if we replace Mintzberg's term *nonmanagerial* with *non-instructional*, the criticism
speaks accurately to the current scholarship on the work of school leaders. Mintzberg argues that
this tendency is "arbitrary" and "may not be in accord with the facts" (p. 57-58), a sentiment
echoed by Grissom and Loeb (2011).

Prioritization and time allocation, while important, are only one of many factors relevant
to the work of school leaders. As fruitful as it might be to focus principals' time on the most
important issues, and delegate less important issues to other staff, this approach is of limited
value. A more promising approach is to investigate what principals actually do to increase their
productivity. To undertake this type of inquiry, we need a more robust framework for examining
the context of school leaders' work, which I will provide below in my exposition of Activity
Theory.

Activity Theory and the Activity System as Unit of Analysis

As I have argued above, examining principals' leadership work by coding their time use
to categories is of limited value, because it glosses over many context-specific factors that are
critical aspects of the decision-making process, and ignores the roles played by other staff, tools,
and organizational norms. Rather than view principals as individual actors who unilaterally
decide what work to do, what to delegate to others, and what not to do, we would do well to view
the work of school leadership as an ever-evolving system. For example, consider a principal who
is approached by a parent regarding a student discipline issue. A reductive view might focus only
on the distribution of the work, and note that discipline is typically delegated to the assistant
principal. March and Heath (1994) describe "decision systems" in organizations are more
complex, undergoing constant development:

When decision systems made up of multiple actors are considered…the decisions by any

individual actor become much more complex, because they have to take into account the

preferences, identities, and likely actions of others. This ecological context of decision

making is also significant to understanding the development of rules. As rules evolve,

their interactions make their outcomes jointly determined. (p. 97)

For example, the principal who is approached by a parent may consider the parent's role as a

stakeholder—as well as the potential for the discipline issue to escalate to the superintendent—in

deciding whether to handle the issue personally or refer it to the assistant principal.

Kuutti argues that "actions are always situated into a context, and they are impossible to

understanding with out that context…a minimal meaningful context for individual actions must

be included in the basic unit of analysis" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 26). If we are to develop a more robust

understanding of what principals do and how they might become more efficient in that work—

that is, more productive—we must examine these factors in depth. But previous studies of this

type (e.g. Wilcott, 1973) have tended to be ethnographies focusing on individual principals and

schools, without attempting to identify common patterns in the work of school leaders. Neither

quantitative time-use studies (e.g. Horng et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2009) nor ethnographic

studies provides a richly textured, yet broadly applicable, framework for addressing the question

of how principals might become more productive. To address this gap, I draw on Activity

Theory to create a framework for examining the leadership actions of principals in the complex

social contexts of schools.

Modern Activity Theory has been applied to a wide range of disciplines, from

psychology to human-computer interaction to education (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki,

1999). The components I will describe below serve the fundamental function of mediating

relationships between actors, tools, and goals. By accounting for the role of mediation in organizational decision-making and behavior, Activity Theory gives us much more powerful tools for examining principals' actions. For example, a principal does not simply "supervise instruction" as a discrete action; what specifically a principal does to fulfill the *responsibility* of supervising instruction involves a great many mediating artifacts. These artifacts include district expectations; within-school norms; policies governing teacher supervision and evaluation; documents such as forms, checklists, and rubrics; tools such as the principal's calendar and computer; the teacher-principal relationship; and other relationships that exist within the school. Activity Theory offers models for organizing these numerous artifacts—as well as the mediating role played by other people—into a coherent framework that allows the work of principals to be examined in its full context, and thus potentially improved.

At the heart of the basic model of activity is the transformation of an *object* into an *outcome*, or goal (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999, p. 30). This transformation serves as the underlying purpose for the *activity*; for example, the *object* of teacher evaluation is directed toward the *outcome* of ensuring quality teaching. Gonzalez (2006, p. 58) explains that "the activity represents the 'true motive' behind people's behaviors." Who accomplishes this transformation of object into outcome, and how? Activity Theory posits that an *action* is performed jointly by both a *subject* and a *community* (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999, p. 31), because often the actions of individuals make little sense when divorced from the actions of their co-workers. In any social endeavor, there may be a degree of indirectness between the actions an individual takes and the ultimate purpose of those actions. Leont'ev famously described a basic example of this phenomenon among primitive hunters:

Bush beaters frighten the game toward the catchers. When compared with the goal of

hunting—to catch the game, for food and clothing—the actions of the bush beaters in

themselves are irrational; they can only be understood as part of the larger system of

hunting activity. (Kuutti, 1996, pp. 28-29)

This distinction between *activity* (which is directly outcome-oriented, but often cannot be "done"

directly) and *action* (which can be "done" but may not directly accomplish the ultimate purpose

that motivates it) is essential to understanding the decisions principals make about how to use

their time. For example, observing a lesson fits Leont'ev's definition of an *action* because it does

not directly accomplish the outcome (purpose) that motivates it: improving student learning.

An *action*, which has a conscious goal, can be further broken down into *operations*,

which are the automatic conditions or physical or mental steps taken to accomplish that goal

(Gonzalez, 2006, p. 57). For example, writing notes during a teacher observation would be an

operation, which contributes to the larger action of observing the teacher.

Before I describe the rest of the activity theory framework, it is worth noting that one

way of increasing one's efficiency in accomplishing a given action is to convert conscious

actions into automatic operations through experience or deliberate practice. Gonzalez explains

how this learning process occurs: "Movement from actions to operations occurs when the

individual becomes skilled and fluent such that there is no need for a conscious effort"

(Gonzalez, 2006, p. 57). For example, creating an email message or completing a form may

initially be *actions* when the steps involved are unfamiliar and require deliberate thought—for

example, when a new email system is adopted. Over time, though, as these steps become more

automatic, the process can change from an action into an *operation*. This has important

implications for principal productivity, and not just in terms of efficiency at low-level tasks. Kuutti explains:

> Initially each operation is a conscious action, consisting of both the orientation and execution phases, but when the corresponding model is good enough and the action has been practiced long enough, the orientation phase will fade and the action will be collapsed into an operation, which is more fluent. At the same time a new action is created that will have broader scope and will contain the recently formed new operation as a subpart. (Kuutti, 1996, p. 31).

In other words, as principals gain experience and skill, they not only become more fluent with low-level operations, but also gain greater capacity for higher-level work, to the extent that this work is composed of bundles of lower-level operational skills. As Heylighen & Vidal (2008) explain, actions can become bundled in "stigmergic" sequences that can be executed nearly automatically. For example, a principal who struggles to collect and organize data from classroom walkthroughs will have greater difficulty using it to make informed decisions, whereas a principal who has systems in place to collect and organize the data easily (for example, an electronic form linked to a spreadsheet) can devote considerably greater attention to using it to advance the school's learning improvement agenda. It is also worth noting that principals' decisions about whether to delegate a particular task may depend on the relative fluency of various staff in completing the task; for example, principals may prefer to personally handle tasks, such as completing reports, that other staff have not yet become fluent with.

We can represent the components of the activity system that I have described so far as follows:
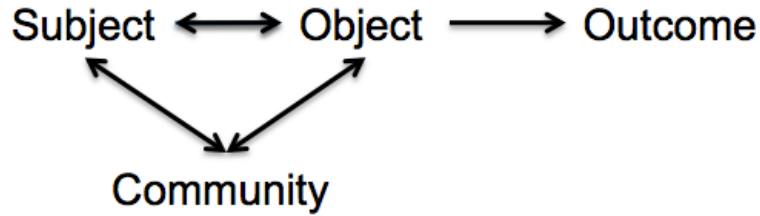
Figure 1: Relationship between subject, community, object, & outcome

Community mediates the relationship between subject (individual) and object (action); in other words, the social context of work (community) is an important factor in the conversion of objects into outcomes (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999). In an organizational context, what an individual does has a great deal to do with what others do; for example, the work a principal chooses to delegate to others depends heavily on who is available to take on delegated tasks.

A second source of mediation between the subject and object in Activity Theory is *tools*, or artifacts. These artifacts can be physical, such as a literal tool in a machine shop, or mental tools, such as conceptual frameworks or heuristics. Kuutti explains that tools hold the "historical development of the relationship between subject and object" stored or "crystallized" into them (Kuutti, 1996, p. 27). Tools relevant for the study of principals' work might include time-management and productivity tools such as calendars, email applications, computers, smartphones, tablets, sticky notes, and other common office equipment and supplies, but could also include contracts, evaluation rubrics, curricula, schedules, decision-making processes, and other information-based tools for making decisions and accomplishing tasks. It is these information-based tools that richly encode the previous experience of organizations and individuals within those organizations.

As Cole notes, tool are artifacts which "carry within them successful adaptations of an earlier time" (1999, p. 90), and while this applies to all tools, a three-level hierarchy is useful for

understanding the various types of artifacts and how they are used. Citing Wartofsky, Cole describes *primary* artifacts as those serving a direct production function; for example, a computer is a tool used directly to produce documents in an office setting. A *secondary* artifact "consists of representations of primary artifacts and of modes of action using them" (Cole, 1999, p. 91). For example, a teacher evaluation form might be considered a primary artifact, whereas the common practice of completing the form after observing a lesson and before meeting with the teacher might be considered a secondary artifact, in that it is a means of using the primary artifact. Finally, a *tertiary* artifact is one that takes on its own abstracted meaning, apart from a direct practical purpose, such as a simulation, game, or challenge. For administrators, professional learning communities might engage principals in role-playing how they would handle various challenging situations, and this would constitute a tertiary artifact or tool. Secondary and tertiary artifacts, such as the practice of completing a particular form at a particular time and role-playing activities among principals, are, like Leont'ev's bush beaters, useful only in the more complex social context that Activity Theory describes.

Just as tools mediate the relationship between subject and object, other factors mediate the relationship between the community, the subject, and the object. Between the subject and community we find *rules*, which Kuutti describes as "both explicit and implicit norms, conventions, and social relations within a community" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 28). For example, a school secretary might operate under the implicit or explicit rule that routine office supply purchases can be made without prior approval by the principal, but nonroutine purchases cannot. As another example, a principal might find that she is expected to prepare an agenda for leadership council meetings, but not to prevent participants from adding items during the meeting.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the community and the object is mediated by the *division of labor*, which Kuutti explains "refers to the explicit and implicit organization of a community as related to the transformation process of the object into the outcome" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 28). For example, in a particular school, an assistant principal may handle discipline, a social worker may handle family crises, and the principal may deal with personnel issues; in another school, work may be divided differently. Diagrammatically, then, the relationships described thus far are as follows:
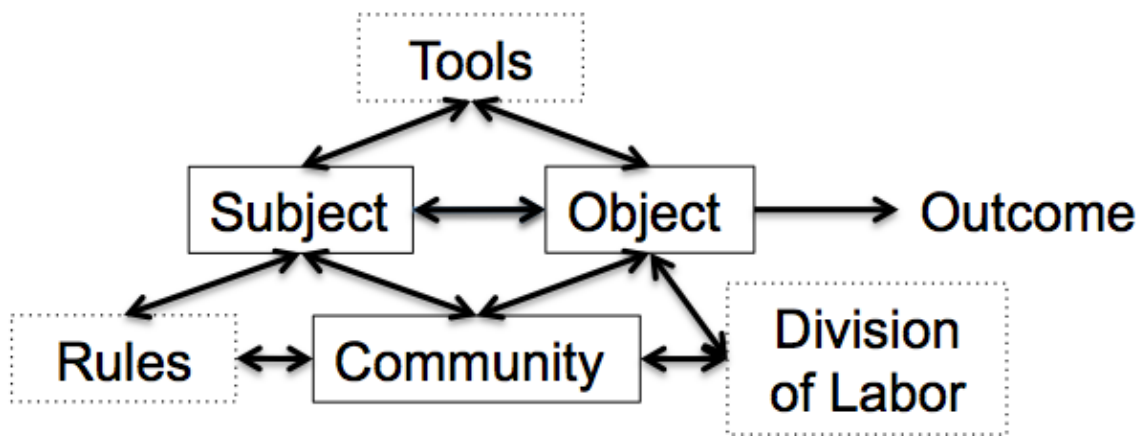
Figure 2. Activity System model, including mediating factors in dotted lines (based on Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999; Gonzalez, 2006; Kuutti, 1996; and others)

Several properties of this basic activity theory model are important to note. First, the relationships represented in the model are dynamic, not static, and are historical in nature. This means that a given activity system "has a history of its own. Parts of older phases of activities often stay embedded in them as they develop, and historical analysis of the development is often needed in order to understand the current situation" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 26). For an examination of the work of school leaders, this means that an understanding of the unique history and context of the school is essential to understanding the full purpose and meaning of a principal's activities. This partially explains why quantitative time-use studies have yielded puzzling and inconclusive

information about effective patterns of behavior for principals (Horng, et al., 2010): the same action can have very different meanings based on its social and historical context, can have multiple purposes even within a given context, and can even be one of several actions engaged in simultaneously. Kuutti notes that "the object of our research is always essentially collective, even if our main interest is in individual actions" and that "an individual can and usually does participate in several activities simultaneously" (Kuutti, 1996, p. 26). This perspective calls into question approaches that merely attempt to document what principals spend their time on and to link patterns of time use to school outcomes.

While Activity Theory has not previously been used to investigate the productivity strategies of school leaders, it has been employed frequently in the field of human/computer interaction, or HCI (Gonzalez, 2006; Kuutti, 1996). Gonzalez studied how knowledge workers in two corporate environments managed "multiple activities," or juggled competing responsibilities, using various digital and non-digital tools. He found that Mintzberg's (1973) characterization of the work of managers was also an apt description of the challenges faced by the knowledge workers he studied, specifically the "fast pace of execution, variety of content, brevity, the fragmentation of work and interactions required" (Gonzalez, 2006, p. 23).

Defining Productivity Strategies

As I will describe in Chapter 3, the activity system depicted in Figure 2 serves to bound the unit of analysis for this study, with the school principal serving as the "subject" in each case. The "community" refers to other school staff who are involved in the principal's leadership work. While other staff may do leadership work without the principal's involvement—indeed, numerous distinct activity systems could be described in any school—the focus of this study is on work that the principal is personally involved in.

One aim of this study is to anchor a definition of *productivity strategies* in the Activity Theory framework, and seems sensible that a productivity strategy might be defined as *an effort to increase efficiency by modifying the elements of the activity system and the mediated relationships between these constituent elements*. In other words, principals might strive to change the relationship between the subject (themselves), object (task), and community (other staff) by modifying tools, rules, and the division of labor, in order to accomplish work with less time and effort. If principals want to be more productive, it follows that changing the conditions under which the operations, actions, and activities composing that work are executed is the path to improvement. This view offers a more viable path to increased productivity than generic admonitions such as "work smarter, not harder" or "delegate" or "prioritize." Such simplistic changes may unrealistic, because they consider only the principal, disregarding the additional mediating elements that Activity Theory identifies. For example, a principal who wants to spend more time on instructional leadership and less time dealing with discipline may not be able to simply "prioritize" classroom observation over student discipline, and may not be able to fully "delegate" this responsibility to someone else, especially if she is the only administrator in the school. But she may be able to influence social rules or norms (for example, the practice of sending misbehaving students to the office rather than handling such situations at the team level), or reconfigure the division of labor (for example, by scheduling a teacher to deal with discipline for an hour a day after lunch), or implement new tools (such as an electronic referral form that requires teachers to provide key information when sending a student to the office for discipline). By knowing more precisely how to address the mediating factors identified by Activity Theory, a school leader may be better able to actually prioritize, delegate, and work smarter. Activity Theory provides us with a complete "unit of analysis"—the activity system—to help us

understand the decisions that principals make in order to accomplish their work efficiently. I will discuss the bounds of this unit of analysis in more detail in Chapter 3.

Activity Theory, Mediation, and Principal Practice

How might we best appreciate the various approaches principals use to increase their productivity, and how might we account for the role of professional networks in the spread of such approaches? Activity Theory suggests a link between the actions of individual principals and the larger context in which educators do their work: "According to activity theory, any local activity resorts to some historically formed mediating artifacts, cultural resources that are common to the society at large. Networks between activity systems provide for movement of artifacts" (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999, p. 8). For example, several respondents reported switching to Google Calendar after many years of using paper calendars or other electronic tools such as Microsoft Outlook. How do such innovations spread? We may expect that one source of productivity strategies is principals' professional networks, including district colleagues, other principals across the state, and professional associations. Developments within an activity system are historical in nature (Kuutti, 1996), reflecting both practices that have been inherited from the individual or organization's past, and adaptations that have been made over time. Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamäki (1999) explain the source of these adaptations, namely that "The internal tensions and contraditions of such a system are the motive force of change and development" (p. 9). Activity Theory suggests, then, that in examining the means by which principals strive to increase their productivity, *tensions* and *contradictions*—or more plainly, frustrations—might explain some purposeful changes, whereas other practices may be largely inherited—the result of the historical development of the activity system within the school.

As we have seen, the concept of *mediation* looms large in Activity Theory (see Figure 2 above). On the surface, principals might appear to use various strategies and technologies to increase their productivity in a fairly straightforward manner—for example, using purpose-built software to complete teacher evaluations more efficiently. At the most basic level, Activity Theory describes the interaction between *subject* and *object* to transform the *object* into an *outcome* (see Figure 1 above) as being mediated by *tools*. However, an awareness of the complete *activity system* (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999) within which principals do their work prompts us to also examine interactions among the *community* (typically, other school employees) and the *rules* and *division of labor* that govern working relationships within the organization. For example, the manner in which a principal uses Google Calendar may be influenced by others' use (or non-use) of the same platform to manage appointments.

Mediation within the activity system operates within constraints—for example, while principals may delegate some tasks to other staff, their ability to do so is bounded by factors such as the skills possessed by those employees and the time they have available to work on additional tasks. These constraints may explain why principals appear not to take maximal advantage of the productivity strategies within their repertoire. Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamäki (1999) explain how treating the entire activity system as the correct unit of analysis for understanding principals' work can help us understand these constraints:

> When the individual action is the privileged unit of analysis, collective practice can only be added on as a more or less external envelope. Human conduct tends to appear as a string of goal-directed acts of rational actors. This leads to difficulties in analysis of the irrational aspects of actions and, more generally, of relationships between collective motives and individual goals. (pp. 11-12)

On the other hand, the various mediating factors within the activity system have their various *advantages*. For example, an assistant principal might be especially adept at creating schedules, and this may explain why one principal delegates that responsibility, while another principal, who has no assistant principal (or one who is not skilled at scheduling) may prefer not to delegate it.

These constraints and advantages have similar features, whether they are human or not. For human mediating factors, these *advantages* might be seen as skills, strengths, or preferences, while *constraints* might be characterized as weaknesses or aversions. For non-human mediating factors, such as tools, we might think of these constraints as drawbacks, and of advantages as *affordances* (Sellen & Harper, 2003). For example, one affordance of Google Calendar is the ability to access the same calendar from multiple devices, and even multiple user accounts (see Chapter 5).

Activity Theory, Distributed Leadership, and Communities of Practice

How does Activity Theory address the various patterns of leadership distribution in schools? I will examine several perspectives, though the distinctions between *shared*, *distributed*, *instructional*, and *learning* leadership are used differently by different authors. Wahlstrom et al. posit that *distributed* leadership "refers to particular leadership practices, not job titles or formal roles" (2010, p. 7). In Figure 2 above, the activity system diagram describes the role of the division of labor (mediating the community's relationship with the object) and interpersonal rules (mediating the subject's relationship with the community), but this does not mean people only exercise influence within their formal job descriptions. In their investigation of *shared leadership* (a term they use to refer specifically to teacher involvement in school-wide decision making), Wahlstrom et al. found that "leadership effects on student learning occur largely

because leadership strengthens professional community; teachers' engagement in professional community, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement" (2010, p. 10), according to an analysis of teacher surveys. This is consistent with the emphasis in Activity Theory on rules, tools, and the division of labor, each of which is relevant to professional community.

At this point, it is helpful to introduce several ideas from Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (1998), an important and theory-rich examination of the social nature of work within organizations. The first concept is *reification*, which Wenger says is "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'" (p. 58). This reflects the Activity Theory concept *tools*, which mediate the relationship between the subject and the object (i.e., the individual and the task at hand). Wenger notes that reification creates tools, and that "having a tool to perform an activity changes the nature of that activity" and that "a good tool can reify an activity so as to amplify its effects while making the activity effortless" (Wenger, 1998, pp. 59, 61), which closely resembles Leont'ev's view of how activities can become actions, and actions can become operations (Engeström, 1999).

Yet reification, to Wenger, has a close interrelationship with his concept of *participation*, which "is essential to repairing the potential misalignments inherent in reification," such as "when the stiffness of its form renders reification obsolete, when its mute ambiguity is misleading, or when its purpose is lost in the distance" (p. 64). In other words, the creation and use of tools also requires active engagement among members of the community, not just blind following of established patterns. Conversely, "reification is essential to repairing the potential misalignments inherent in participation" as well, such as "when the informality of participation is confusingly loose" or "when the fluidity of its implicitness impedes coordination" (p. 64). Put

differently, a community benefits from having tools to structure its interactions, just as it benefits from interactions that prevent its tools from becoming hindrances rather than aids to productivity.

In Wenger's conception, *communities of practice* are characterized by *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire*. He links mutual engagement to the negotiation of meaning, noting that "Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another" (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). Applied to the work of school leadership in all its forms, Wenger's concept of *mutual engagement* puts into context the claim by Portin et al. (2009) that instructional leadership is inherently distributed, "stretched across" multiple staff, and not merely delegated or divvied up. Portin et al. sought to understand how

> leadership responsibilities are meaningfully distributed and connected across individuals
> who occupy different formal and informal positions within the school, rather than simply
> dispersed, so that the exercise of leadership across the school reflects effort toward a
> common learning improvement agenda. (Portin, et al., 2009, p. 110)

This common agenda for improving teaching and learning echoes Wenger's idea of *joint enterprise*, which "creates among participants relationships of mutual accountability that become an integral part of the practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 78).

Finally, s*hared repertoire* overlaps considerably with the *rules*, *tools*, and *division of labor* concepts in Activity Theory:

> The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing
> things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has

produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its

practice. (Wenger, 1998, p. 83)

In essence, this repertoire provides a set of heuristics or shortcuts that members of the

community of practice can use to accomplish their work more efficiently (though curiously,

Wenger does not address productivity or efficiency in his book). The fact that the community

produces this repertoire over time echoes the importance in Activity Theory of *historical

development*. As Kuutti explains, "activity theory is a philosophical and cross-disciplinary

framework for studying different forms of human practices as *development processes*, with both

individual and social levels interlinked at the same time" (1996, p. 25, emphasis added).

Engeström argues that "activity theory has the conceptual and methodological potential to be a

pathbreaker in studies that help humans gain control over their own artifacts and thus over their

future" (Engeström, 1999, p. 29). To the extent that creating and using artifacts is a critical way

that communities of practice tackle their work, this claim seems warranted.

While Wenger's conception of communities of practice describes the work of educators

quite well, a school should not be seen as a single community of practice, but rather of several

that overlap and interact. Not all teachers in a school are mutually engaged together in a joint

enterprise with a common repertoire of practices, as much as leaders might wish otherwise. This

has important implications for the work of principals, who serve a boundary-spanning role and

are "likely…to be simultaneously involved in multiple leadership responsibilities" (Wahlstrom,

et al., 2010, p. 11). In the present study, the unit of analysis is the activity system for the

principal's work, as described in Figure 2 above; other communities of practice that may exist

within a school are beyond the scope of this study.

In sum, Activity Theory is an ideal lens for examining principal productivity because it accounts for the socially negotiated nature of principals' work, addresses the role of tools, and includes the various individuals with whom the principal shares leadership work in its unit of analysis, the activity system. This allows for a much richer examination of the productivity practices principals employ than previous time-use studies, and facilitates the identification of patterns and themes to a degree that would be challenging in purely ethnographic work without such a powerful analytical framework.

Chapter 3: Study Design & Research Methods

Research Design

This is study uses a multiple case study design (Yin, 2014) to develop grounded theory. Ultimately, a research design must serve the purposes of the study, and this begins at the epistemological level. Kelly (2006, p. 34) notes that "the extent to which observations can serve as the basis for knowledge raises the issue of theory-ladenness of perception. Observation is not independent of the intellectual apparatus brought to bear on the object(s) of concern." Indeed, the lack of a robust framework for examining principal productivity has resulted in confusion among scholars who have attempted to observe principals in action and code their behavior (Buttram, 2008; Horng et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2009). So we must begin with conceptual tools that are up to the task (in this case, starting with Activity Theory), then select appropriate methods for data collection and analysis.

Given the challenge of collecting the rich array of data that Activity Theory suggests are relevant to my research questions, the case study method emerged as the best option; according to Yin (2006, p. 112), case studies are appropriate "when research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions and aims to produce a firsthand understanding of people and events." While extensive ethnographic studies such as Wolcott's *The Man in the Principal's Office* (Wolcott, 1973) provide unmatched depth and texture, this study aimed to identify patterns and map territory that would not have been fully discoverable from a single case, so the *multiple case* method seems most appropriate. Principal productivity is a phenomenon which is impossible to study separate from its context, so the case study method is ideal because of its particularistic and richly descriptive nature (Merriam, 2009). Studying multiple principals in different settings allowed me to "establish the range of generality of a finding or explanation," such as the way

principals manage rules, tools, and the division of labor to increase their productivity, and "pin down the conditions under which that finding will occur" (Borman, Clarke, & Cotner, 2006, p. 123). Exploring these conditions any other way would be nearly impossible because "the variables are so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time" (Merriam, 2009, pp. 46-47).

Nevertheless, several alternative methodologies merited consideration. For example, surveys are a popular way to collect data from school principals, but based on my sharp critique of the principal time-use studies (Buttram, 2008; Horng et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2009), I believed a survey would provide very limited information. As I have argued at length above, understanding the behavior of individuals in complex organizations cannot be accomplished by merely observing and categorizing behaviors, but requires asking participants to explain and interpret their actions in light of the unique contextual factors that shape their behavior and work. Furthermore, Activity Theory's emphasis on social context and historical development suggests that the roles played by other key individuals with whom principals share the work of leadership are of great importance. This includes both other office staff, to whom principals may delegate tasks, and teacher-leaders, who exercise leadership influence even if not given a formal title or formal leadership tasks.

Ethnography presents itself as another alternative; one of the most compelling portraits of school leadership is Wolcott (1973), which presented an in-depth, year-long ethnographic study of a single principal and his context. While context is essential to understanding the phenomena of interest, context itself is not what I sought to describe in this study. Case study is a more appropriate method than ethnography because of my focused interest in understanding the principal activity system in the context of productivity, rather than in the unique characteristics

of each principal or school context. The case study approach allowed me to develop grounded

theory based on the particulars of my study sites, but with a view toward addressing broader

questions. The case study method allowed me to investigate principal productivity in the actual

context in which it operates, which, as Yin notes, is important "especially when the boundaries

between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2008, p. 18, as cited in Merriam,

2009, p. 40).

The first step in conducting a case study is to define the case (Yin, 2006), and for the

purposes of bounding my inquiry into principal productivity, it was important to draw on the

Activity Theory literature, which defines the constituent elements of the *activity system*. At the

most basic level, one might consider each principal as a case, though the perspectives of and

leadership exercised by other key staff are relevant as well. To clarify this boundary, a more

precise definition of the case is the *principal activity system*—in other words, the work of

leadership in which the principal (but not necessarily the principal alone) is personally involved.

Staff who work closely alongside the principal, such as secretaries, counselors, and assistant

principals, may also do a great deal of work without the principal's involvement, and some of

this work may rightly be classified as leadership work. However, if the principal is not involved,

such work falls outside the scope of this study. Thus, my unit of analysis is individual principals,

or more precisely, *the activity system representing each principal's leadership work*, as depicted

in Figure 2.

Because this study involved 10 principals in different schools, this investigation is a

multiple case (or *multicase*) study, in which each case "is of interest because it belongs to a

particular collection of cases…[which] share a common characteristic or condition" (Stake,

2006, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 49). While focusing on a single site would have allowed me

to develop a richer description of that particular case, the additional information collected would have added little of interest to my research questions. Studying multiple principals allowed me to put each case and its implications for my research questions into a larger context, to "understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29) by comparing and contrasting my findings between sites. As Stake (2006) notes, "Each case to be studied has its own problems and relationships. The cases have their stories to tell…but the official interest is in the collection of these cases or the phenomenon exhibited in those cases" (p. vi). In the present study, it is phenomena, not a particular program, that are of primary interest, in contrast to other studies such as Turnbull et al. (2009) that aim to evaluate the implementation of a specific program in multiple settings.

For each case, I conducted a phone interview with the principal; interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes in length. These phone interviews were followed by full-day site visits to three schools, which are described below.

Approval and Consent

The University of Washington Human Subjects Division classified this study as "minimal risk" and waived the requirement to obtain written documentation of consent from participants. Respondents were emailed a copy of the approved Consent Form, and were asked to notify their staff prior to any onsite data collection. Other staff were verbally informed of their right to decline to speak with the researcher.

Participants and Recruitment

I attempted to include a diverse range of principals in terms of experience, geographic setting, grade level, and student population characteristics. Respondents are not representative of

the larger population of principals in the US, but were purposively selected in order to obtain

rich information about the constructs of interest. This goal led me not to select principals at

random, but to seek principals who were experienced enough to have attained a degree of

perspective on their work. As Stake notes, "it is often better to pick the cases that most enhance

our understanding than to pick the most typical cases. In fact, highly atypical cases can

sometimes give the best insights" (2006, p. vii). For this reason, participants in this study were

selected based on recommendations from state principals' association officers. I contacted

officers of the associations in Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee, and Louisiana; however,

only staff of the Cooperative Council for Oklahoma School Administration (CCOSA) and the

Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA) responded to my repeated

inquiries. CCOSA and TEPSA staff provided a total of 41 possible respondents. I contacted all

41 via email on at least two occasions to solicit their participation; of these 41, six declined to

participate, 25 never responded, and 10 were ultimately interviewed for this study. All

participants were principals in Texas or Oklahoma public schools at the time of their interviews.

Because they were known to state association officers, and not selected at random from the

population of all public school principals, they should not be seen as a representative sample,

even of public school principals in their respective states.

Several factors informed the decision to recruit participants via state associations rather

than reach out to principals directly. First, I assumed that principals recommended by state

association officers would be generally amenable to participating in this type of study, given

their history of engaging with the state association. Second, I assumed that principals would be

more likely to respond to a request if it came with the implicit endorsement of state association

officers. Given that 10 out of 41 principals I contacted responded and agreed to participate—and

several others responded and declined to participate—these first two assumptions seem

warranted. Third, I assumed principals recommended by state association officers would satisfy

my criterion of generativity—that is, that respondents would be experienced, knowledgeable,

reflective, and forthright in their responses. While I did not make any formal attempt to test these

assumptions, respondents were more than satisfactory, providing rich insights into their work as

school leaders.

Table 1 lists respondents by gender, school level, and locale according to the NCES

Locale Framework. Locale classifications were retrieved from the NCES database on April 17,

2018. Pseudonyms were applied in the final stages of editing.

Respondent #	Gender	Level	Locale	Pseudonym
1	Female	Elementary	Suburb—Large (21)	Julie
2	Female	Middle	Town—Distant (32)	Karen
3	Male	High	City—Large (11)	Richard
4	Male	Middle	Rural—Remote (43)	Mike
5	Male	Elementary	Town—Fringe (31)	Paul
6	Male	Middle	Rural—Fringe (41)	Steven
7	Female	Elementary	Rural—Fringe (41)	Linda
8	Male	Middle	Rural—Fringe (41)	Chuck
9	Male	Middle	Town—Remote (33)	Lance
10	Male	High	Town—Distant (32)	Mark

Table 1. Participant demographics & pseudonyms

Principals who participated only in phone interviews were not asked to inform their staff of their participation or otherwise involve them in the study (though some office staff became aware of phone interviews in the course of answering the phone and working in proximity to the principal during the interview). Principals who participated in onsite interviews were asked to identify additional key staff to participate in informal conversations—staff who either play a leadership role that intersects in some way with the principal's role, or who are directly involved in working with or supporting the principal, e.g. individuals to whom the principal regularly delegates tasks. This group of staff included secretaries, assistant principals, counselors, and other office staff, as well as custodians, and teacher-leaders (formal or informal) who exercise instructional leadership.

Consequences of Recruitment Strategy

The decision to recruit participants for this study via state principals' associations had several consequences for the ultimate composition of the sample. As noted above, the sample should not be seen as representative of a larger population of principals or principals in general; in a qualitative multiple case study design such as this, participants are selected with the goal of generativity—that is, being able to speak to the constructs of interest—rather than representativeness. However, it may be helpful for future studies to focus on principals with other demographic characteristics, in order to capture dimensions of the constructs of interest that vary meaningfully across contexts.

All respondents were from Oklahoma or Texas, because of the principals' associations I contacte, only association staff in Oklahoma and Texas responded to my inquiries; I did not receive a reply from association staff in Tennessee, Missouri, or Louisiana. As evident from the NCES codes in Table 1, only one participant, Richard, was from an urban school, and only one,

Julie, was from a suburban setting; the rest were from small towns and rural areas. The seeming underrepresentation of urban and suburban schools is likely due to several factors. First, it is likely that urban and suburban school districts, which tend to be larger than rural and small-town districts, conduct more internal professional development for principals, leaving less need and opportunity for involvement with the state principals' associations. Principals not intimately involved with their state associations were unlikely to be nominated, leading to over-representation of small-town and rural principals in the present study. Second, it is also fairly likely that urban and suburban principals in closer proximity to universities face more frequent requests from researchers, which may reduce their willingness to participate in any particular study; Karen noted that her district had strict procedures in place to limit the impact of university-based research on principals and schools. In contrast, rural principals such as Mike seemed somewhat surprised to be asked to participate. When asked, at the conclusion of our phone interview, if he would be willing to participate in an onsite interview, Mike replied "Sure, sure I guess, if you want to come here. You know. Find your way to western Oklahoma. Good luck!"

The over-representation of rural principals was likely responsible for the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among participants; while personal characteristics such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity were not part of the selection criteria and were not among the data collected about each participant, no evidence emerged to challenge the assumption that rural Texas and Oklahoma principals are largely mid- to late-career caucasians—typically male at the secondary level, and typically female at the elementary level. Future studies focusing on similar research questions, but inclusive of more diverse ranges of principals, may add richly to the knowledge base about principal workload management practices by incorporating evidence from

participants with a broader range of personal experiences and contextual circumstances. For example, the tasks that principals routinely work on may vary meaningfully between urban, rural, and suburban schools. Similarly, the approaches that principals use to manage their work—such as their approach to delegating—may vary based on setting and principal demographic characteristics. Such questions were beyond the scope of this study, but are worth noting as a limitation of this study's findings, and worth considering in the design of future studies addressing similar questions.

The over-representation of rural principals in this study also likely resulted in a slight under-representation of female principals and elementary principals, since larger districts tend to have more than one elementary school for each middle and high school, and in such districts, men are likely over-represented in secondary school principalships. Smaller districts, in contrast, often have just a single elementary, middle, and high school, and we may speculate that these tendencies contributed to the appearance of only three female principals in the present study. Of these three, two did not respond to my repeated requests to schedule site visits, and I confirmed that one had taken another position; thus no female principals were able to participate site visits. Future studies may explore gender and geographical differences in principals' responses to similar questions about their productivity strategies.

Data Collection

Phone Interviews

Interviews were conducted via telephone between May 2016 and March 2017, and recorded and transcribed. All 10 respondents were asked in our phone interview if they would be willing to participate in an onsite interview. All indicated that they were willing, but one respondent indicated that her district would probably not give permission for me to visit. I

contacted each respondent via email in November 2017 to arrange an onsite interview; 7 either

did not reply, or indicated that they were no longer in the same role. The other three—

respondents 6, 8, and 10—responded and scheduled onsite interviews, which were conducted in

December 2017 and January 2018.

Phone interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, following an interview guide

(see Appendix 1) that specified questions and topics but allowed the researcher to ask follow-up

questions and otherwise probe responses to gain additional insight (Johnson & Turner, 2003). As

Christ (2007, p. 227) notes, interview data can be analyzed

> utilizing key grounded theory techniques including constant comparative method of data
>
> analysis and recursive coding strategies to identify core theoretical conceptions that
>
> emerge from themes. The core theoretical conceptions that emerge can be used to inform
>
> decisions about the focus, design, and analysis of subsequent phases in a project. This
>
> process of using core knowledge gained from earlier phases of analysis to logically
>
> inform decisions follows the original intent of grounded theory, that of developing theory
>
> from data.

In this way, interview responses were used to identify and clarify various phenomena described

by principals. While there are many other qualitative data collection techniques that could be

used in a study such as this, from focus groups to ethnographic participant-observation (Wolcott,

1973), interviews provided respondents with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and

describe them to the researcher in their own words.

Site Visits

Interviews were followed by direct observation in site visits, which strengthened the

trustworthiness of my data because "people do not always do what they say they do" (Johnson &

Turner, 2003, p. 312). These visits also allowed me to note relevant information that principals might not have mentioned in phone interviews. Seeing my participants interact with other staff throughout the school day provided important triangulating data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Of course, just as participants can tell researchers "what they want to hear" in interviews, they can also show researchers "what they want to see" in observations; nevertheless, using both approaches can identify discrepancies and increase the researcher's chance at seeing "backstage" behavior. In site visits, I presented myself as an "observer-as-participant," to use the typology Johnson & Turner (2003) borrow from Gold (1958).

In each site visit, I arrived before the school day began, attempting to time my arrival with the principal's. I then shadowed the principal for the entire school day (with the exception of lunch), and stayed until the end of the school day or shortly after. Each respondent had set aside some time to speak with me privately, but most of the day was spent on work activities such as supervising students, attending meetings, talking with teachers, and working in the office. Steven and his assistant principal sat down together with me at the end of the day to talk about their approach to working together, and Chuck took me around to various staff to discuss different aspects of the work of leadership throughout the day. Mark invited me to accompany him to a classroom for a formal teacher observation. All three principals invited me to accompany them to the lunchroom during student lunch periods. In all of these settings, I took notes and asked questions, but did not record audio or video. I referred to my research questions and phone interview notes and transcripts to guide my inquiry, but did not follow an interview protocol in these onsite interviews. All field notes were taken with pen and paper, and later typed into electronic documents.

Respondents had been asked to notify their staff that I would be shadowing them for the day, and that staff were free to choose whether to speak with me or not. Respondents had some private conversations out of my hearing, but otherwise provided full access to their conversations, meetings, and work. When working at their desks, respondents sometimes narrated what they were doing for my benefit; while I did not sit close enough to read the contents of onscreen documents and emails, respondents allowed me to generally see what they were doing, e.g. which computer applications they were using, and for what general purposes. For example, I was able to ascertain when respondents were answering email, reading internet articles, and accessing records in their student information system. I took field notes about these patterns as they related to my research questions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began during phone interviews; in a qualitative study of this type, it would have been a mistake to postpone data analysis until after fieldwork concluded; indeed, Yin notes that it is often necessary to analyze data while it is being collected, in order to identify and investigate contradictions and conflicts (Yin, 2006). Because my investigation of principal productivity strategies was based heavily on the core constructs of Activity Theory, it was necessary to examine the degree to which my data "fit" well with this framework—a process Yin (2006) describes as *pattern-matching*. Since a goal of this study was to generate theory about principal productivity, the *constant comparative* method for analyzing data allowed me to examine my data in light of my conceptual framework, and allowed me to focus my data collection efforts accordingly (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Transcripts and Coding

Phone interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. These transcripts were then imported into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program. Field notes from site visits were also typed and imported into Dedoose. Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was applied to the transcripts using Dedoose, which allows multiple codes to be applied to a given section of data. A total of 471 initial codes were generated, and applied in 1,128 instances. These codes were then condensed into categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), and organized by research question into an outline that was used to plan the writing of the findings chapters of this dissertation. Many of these categories did not contain sufficient evidence to justify their inclusion in the findings of this study, and others were combined into single paragraphs, so not all categories appear as distinct headings in the findings chapters. As Corbin and Strauss explain, categories are

> Higher-level concepts under which analysts group lower-level concepts that then become its subcategories. Categories are sometimes referred to as themes. They represent relevant phenomena and enable analysts to reduce, combine, and integrate data. (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 220)

It is natural for this initial process to generate a large number of concepts, many of which will be discarded in the process of analysis. Some of these "concepts will be carried over and developed further" while others "may be discarded or combined depending on [the researcher's] interpretations of the new data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 236). The full scheme of original categories is included as Appendix 2.

Memos

Memos are crucial to developing grounded theory; as Corbin and Strauss note, they are essential for capturing "the thinking that goes into analysis" (2015, p. 107), which may not be

reflected in the final product. Indeed, memos served an important role during the coding and outlining phase of the analysis process. I wrote a total of 36 memos in Dedoose during the analysis process, from August 2017 to February 2018. These memos served to help the researcher develop "concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 107). For example, Memo 22 reflects an early iteration of my thinking about how principals monitor and alter the division of labor by reassigning tasks or even assigning staff to new roles. It reads:

> Both R2 and R4 gave examples of changes to secretarial staff that I found surprising:
>
> —R2 assigned a fiscal secretary to cover in-school suspension in response to budget cuts
>
> —R4 made a custodian his secretary
>
> —R4 also cited a secretary at another district school that could train teachers in a software system if a key teacher left—a secretary who had been a teacher.
>
> This flexibility seems to be a useful consequence of how much secretarial staff know— either before becoming secretary (e.g. as custodian) or afterward. They have relationships—not always warm—with many people, and know how to get things done.
>
> (Memo 22, August 30, 2017)

Although many specific concepts in this memo—such as the idea of secretaries knowing "how to get things done"—were ultimately found to be too thinly supported by the data, this analysis contributed to the findings described in Chapter 6—for example, the section on moving non-teaching staff into different positions. Memos frequently included questions that pushed against the boundaries of this study's scope; while these questions often went unanswered due to their tangential relationship to the study's research questions, they were helpful in determining the

range of concepts represented in the data, and in making choices about where to focus further data collection and analysis.

Cross-Case Analysis

Because this study was designed as a multiple case study examining the same phenomena in multiple settings, rather than a specific program being implemented in multiple settings, several issues about cross-case analysis merit discussion. Stake (2006) uses the term *Quintain* to describe the larger focus of interest, which can be either a program or a phenomenon represented in a collection of cases. He notes that there is a tension, or "dialectic" (p. 39) between focusing in the themes—which cut across cases—and the findings, which originate in cases themselves:

> To treat them both as forces for understanding the Quintain, the Analyst keeps them both alive even as he or she is writing the Assertions of the final report. The Themes preserve the main research questions for the overall study. The Findings preserve certain activity (belonging to Case and Quintain alike) found in the special circumstances of the Cases. When the Themes and Factors meet, they appear to the Analyst as both consolidation and extension of understanding. (Stake, 2006, p. 40)

In this study, the research questions dictated a focus on phenomena related to how principals manage their work; no common program was in place across cases. While all respondents were public school principals in Oklahoma and Texas, differences between cases were substantial, and suggest caution in drawing direct comparisons beyond the level of phenomena. For example, while all schools had secretaries, the number of secretaries, and their various duties, varied widely from site to site, as I will describe in Chapter 6. Because the principal activity system was the unit of analysis, I did not set out to compare the cases structurally; for example, I did not seek to inventory and compare the duties of secretaries in various schools.

Cross-case analysis focused on the phenomena described in Chapters 4-7; because all initial phone interviews followed a common interview guide (see Appendix 1), respondents were able to speak to the phenomena of interest despite the substantial differences in their settings.

Grounded Theory

Because the design of this study was informed by a strong conceptual framework—in particular, building on Gonzalez' (2006) application of Activity Theory to knowledge-worker productivity—it should not be regarded as pure grounded theory, but rather informed by grounded theory approaches. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note

> it is perfectly legitimate, and often desirable, to work from the top down—from a conceptual framework to the collection of information testing its validity. Of course, you have to stay open to the idea that the concept is inapplicable, or has to be bent or discarded when you see the data. Concepts without corresponding facts are hollow, just as facts without concepts are, literally, meaningless. (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 262)

Appendix 2 displays the full outline of initial categories, which were condensed into a smaller number of headings as the writing process progressed. As Corbin and Strauss note (2015, p. 76), "incidents sharing some common characteristic(s) are grouped under the same conceptual heading" in order to work up to higher-level categories:

> By using basic-level concepts as the foundation for our theory, we are never too far removed from the data, thereby grounding the theory. Also, basic-level concepts provide the detail, interest, and variation that make theory relevant. While basic-level concepts provide the foundation, higher-level, more abstract concepts provide the structure or framework of a theory. They help hold the theory together. As concepts move toward greater levels of abstraction, they gain greater explanatory power, meaning they can

accommodate more detail under them. However, at the same time, they lose some of their

specificity. (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 76-77)

This tension echoes Stake's (2006) dialectic between the Quintain, or larger phenomenon of

interest, and the case-specific findings in which our understandings of these phenomena are

rooted. In sum, while data analysis was guided by a strong conceptual framework, the formation

of core categories was reflective of grounded-theoretical approaches.

Chapter 4: Challenges to Principal Productivity

The backdrop for understanding principals' approaches to increasing their productivity is comprised of the workload they face, the common frustrations this workload causes, and the nature of the social and technological context in which principals do their work. In this chapter, I will explore the range of frustrations and challenges that principals expressed about their work, with a view toward understanding how they respond to those challenges. Specific strategies are described in subsequent chapters. This chapter aims to answer the following research question:

Research Question 1: Sources of Frustration & Barriers to Productivity—what are the common sources of frustration or barriers to principal productivity? In other words, what reduces principals' efficiency in accomplishing the work of school leadership?

The Overall Workload

As noted in chapter 2, principals face a heavy and varied workload, several features of which emerged from the data in this study. The first and most salient feature of this workload is its breadth, encompassing an enormous range of tasks and responsibilities. Unlike other staff, who may have narrower and better-defined areas of responsibility, principals are ultimately responsible for everything on campus. As Julie, a suburban Texas elementary school principal, noted, even her awareness of the physical plant is heightened by her unique role as principal:

> You know, when you're the principal, it does make—it is like, this is like my home, and I didn't realize how much, being a principal, I'm constantly—I can just see things I feel like nobody else sees, because I feel like it's my home—I, like, gotta fix things, I mean. "Look…that's broken!"

This holistic sense of responsibility is coupled with the symbolic role principals play as leaders of their organizations. Mintzberg (1973) suggests that this "figurehead" role differs from other

managerial roles in that it requires the principal's time, even if no substantive work needs to be done by the principal, because the leader's presence is expected at various events: "Some of these are trite, others are of an inspirational nature; all involve interpersonal activity, but none involves significant information-processing or decision-making" (p. 58). As I will explore in Chapter 6 below, the symbolic importance of the principal's involvement places constraints on the use of delegation as a strategy for workload reduction; as Julie noted, while she has attempted to delegate most "managerial" duties to her assistant principal, meetings with parents are an exception: "I can't delegate that," she stated.

However, principal involvement in a wide range of issues is not merely symbolic; it also has informational implications for what Mintzberg describes as the leader's *monitor* role, "continually seeking, and being bombarded with, information that enables him [sic] to understand what is taking place in his organization and its environment" (1973, p. 67). Chuck, a middle school principal in a small rural Oklahoma district, noted that "divorcing" oneself from this information can have catastrophic consequences:

> Special ed is another area where sometimes our principals like to kind of divorce themselves and delegate, and they really don't know what's going on. ... And so as a leader, there's that delicate balance between delegating and divorcing yourself from different things. And if you ever get to the point where you're completely divorcing yourself from any part of the process, it can get sideways quickly, because things are going to begin to happen that are outside of the vision and mission of what you've kind of set out, and you begin to have different pieces that are going in different directions.

This broad range of informational responsibilities requires principals to deal with high volumes of incoming information, which arrives in various formats, from verbal to written to electronic.

Mintzberg (1973) posited that managers prefer to receive "current, nondocumented information transmitted largely by word of mouth" (p. 69). Principals participating in this study certainly engaged in frequent informal conversations with staff, but an important difference in principals' communication context in the 21st century deserves special note: the ubiquity of email.

Email and Text Messaging

Respondents noted that dealing with work-related email has become more and more time consuming over the years, and now consumes a substantial portion of each day. During a site visit, Mark, a high school principal, noted while working at his computer that that keeping up with emails is a never-ending chore: "Every time I open my email, I've got more emails. I tend to deal with them as they come—not sure if that's the best way, but when they pile up, I get behind." He noted that email is generally effective, but not always his preferred mode of communication with staff—for example, with older teachers who may be less accustomed to checking email—and does not create a significant time savings when communicating with individuals:

> We have about 34-35 staff. I can walk to any room, even the one across the parking lot, in 45 seconds or a minute. It's—our building is not so big that I can't get places pretty quickly. So although I don't have to do that a lot, there are times that I do want to communicate face-to-face, because they're not responding, or maybe it's just something that I think is better—and it's a very short walk to get there.

This concern for face-to-face communication, even though email is efficient for some types of communication, was echoed by other respondents. Linda, a rural Oklahoma elementary principal, described email as a major challenge, noting that the timing and topic of emails can make it difficult to reply efficiently:

I am horrible at replying to emails, because what happens is I get them in the evening,

and then I think, well that's too much to type out on my phone, so I'll reply tomorrow,

and then I forget—you know, there's just so much that comes in the inbox. I haven't

really developed a great plan for replying to emails. I'm also incredibly direct when I

email, and sometimes that doesn't always go over well, so I have to be—you know, I

can't just say OK, from 9 to 10, I'm going to reply to all emails, because no matter—if

something else is going on, I may not reply in a very nice way, you know? I mean, I have

to really be thoughtful about that.

This need to not only reply to a high volume of emails, but to reply to each in a timely manner,

while minimizing the potential for miscommunication, is a formidable challenge facing

principals. If this challenge is not handled effectively—for example, if the principal fails to

respond in a timely manner—it can create additional work. Linda noted that if she fails "to get

back with them at all, and then I get another email that says 'I never got a response about my

[issue].'" The challenges of electronic messaging extend into text messaging as well, which

several respondents cited as a frequent mode of communication. Steven, a rural Oklahoma

middle school principal, noted that teachers make frequent use of text messages to reach him,

despite having access to him via email, phone, and intercom:

I would definitely say my cell phone is a big—I use it hourly, if not minute by minute.

Just teachers themselves texting me about a question, either about a student or sometimes

they'll even text me about coming down to their room to maybe deal with a student.

Although obviously they have that capability through intercom, buzzing the office, but

sometimes it's one of those situations where they don't necessarily want to make a big

deal about it, but they do want me to come down and maybe talk to the kids. So they'll

text me that kind of thing.

Chuck noted that he prefers emails, but that teachers sometimes text him in order to get a faster

reply. Steven noted that parents, too, tend to text him on his personal cell phone:

Basically I'm a hometown guy. Wasn't born here, but pretty much have been here all my

life. And so a lot of the parents know me, they have my cell phone number, and they also

text me. It's one of those things where sometimes it's a blessing, but sometimes it's a

curse.

Despite the ubiquity of electronic communication tools, Linda noted that "when it comes right

down to it, a lot of my job is kind of old school, you know? People need a personal note

sometimes." This hesitation toward simply using the most expedient technology suggests the

presence of factors that mediate the use of technology for communicating and prosecuting the

work of school leadership. Activity Theory suggests several strong possibilities, which will be

explored below.

Mental Demands of the Role

The principalship is demanding—even overwhelming—in ways that extend beyond the

hours or the workload. Respondents mentioned numerous emotional and cognitive demands of

the role—for example, Julie, the suburban elementary principal, noted that dealing with teacher

complaints "sucks the life out of me." In some cases, principals reported being asked to take on

additional duties outside the traditional scope of the principalship, which push them to the limits

of their capacity. Chuck related a situation from a tight budget year in which he was asked to

take on the duties of a departing staff member, in addition to his own:

[O]ur athletic director quit right before school started. And so our superintendent said "Merry Christmas" to the middle and high school principals, "You two are now co-athletic directors." And so it was a huge addition to my plate… I had to be careful in not allowing it to overwhelm and take over every second of my day…

These mental demands may be higher in times of transition. For instance, one source of demands involves the learning curve of setting expectations, building relationships, and developing trust with staff in a new school. Karen, a middle school principal, noted that she was initially inundated with minor requests from staff who felt the need to ask permission for everything—even small supply orders:

In my first years as principal, I had spent a lot of time saying yes, you can do this. Yes, you can do this. And at the end of the year, I was exhausted. I'm like, why do they think they need permission for everything? I mean it was from ordering supplies—they don't need my permission to order supplies. Go fill out the form! You know, it was—they felt like they needed my OK on everything, and so I really had to work with them on like, OK, you guys, we're all educators, we're all adults, I'm going to trust you. And so, in the beginning, I don't know if I had set my expectations for them, and what they could do, and what I wanted to know, and what I didn't want to know, but I think there was also a level of trust that had to be earned in the beginning, and now that we have this trust that yes, I'll help them—whatever they need help with—but that they're also free to make decisions. And I think that's real important. And so it's taken seven—this is year seven—and so it took some time to evolve to this, but I think trust is a big factor if you're going to implement this type of empowerment in your building.

This contrast—between a high degree of uncertainty that requires a high volume of communication, and a high degree of empowerment based on shared expectations and requiring less communication—has implications for the division of labor, which I will address at length in Chapter 6.

Teacher Evaluations

An especially time-consuming and time-sensitive responsibility for school principals is teacher evaluation, which as Richard noted is especially time-consuming in his large high school:

> A big part of our responsibility is the evaluation process, and I have close to 40 faculty and staff members that I'm responsible for evaluating. And I probably have to say, as you can imagine, with each evaluation including a preconference, an observation, and a postconference, in Oklahoma we have to conduct roughly three—two observations first semester, two observations second semester for our probationary teachers, and one observation, one postconference each semester for our career teachers.

He further noted that teacher observations are not unpleasant, but do take time to conduct effectively: "And it's actually one of the most enjoyable parts of our job, basically, seeing students learn. But it also happens to be one of the most time-consuming, if done the right way." Multiple respondents noted that newer staff tend to create more work for the principal, both due to additional observation requirements for probationary teachers, and due to these teachers' lack of experience and skill. Mike noted that while he has some newer teachers who are weaker, "the rest of my staff's been here quite a few years, so that's helped make my job a lot easier in some respects."

Oklahoma principals reported that their teacher evaluation work has been shaped in recent years by the passage of new legislation that led to the adoption of a new teacher

evaluation system. Respondents characterized this new system as being better than the old

system, though accompanied by a time-consuming learning curve, as Mark, a high school

principal, related:

> About five years ago, we had legislation go through that changed the way that we
>
> evaluate. And there were pros and cons about that, but the system that we have, the
>
> evaluation instrument that we use, is not a bad instrument. And so I think it has been
>
> beneficial. I think it's probably better than what most schools used. I think it's probably
>
> better than the instrument that we were using… So that in and of itself made things a
>
> little bit better, and so now, even though I've been through trainings, the more you use
>
> something, the more comfortable you get with it. I mean, it's got 20 indicators on it. The
>
> majority of those indicators, I know really what I'm looking for. Some of them, again,
>
> I'm still fine-tuning. But I think as we get more comfortable with the instrument—and
>
> again, part of that is learning. …we have grown in trying to become more data-driven,
>
> you know, trying to expand our teaching methods—just a lot of different things that
>
> we're doing—it's made that instrument much easier to use.

Because it is a state-wide system, Mark noted that experienced teachers who are new to the

district are already familiar with it, reducing the need to clarify expectations about performance:

> So when I have a brand new teacher in, we talk about it, but if it's a teacher that comes
>
> from another district, you know, I tell them to come see me, but otherwise they're
>
> probably familiar with what the instrument looks like.

For principals, a significant aspect of gaining proficiency in using the new teacher evaluation

system involved learning new software systems, and using these systems takes considerable time

on an ongoing basis—both because of the software, and because the new system requires more

detailed comments in more areas. Mike, a middle school principal, explained that his district's new system allows him to make ratings on a rubric, and add comments for each rating: "I take notes…it's got a rubric, and it's got a little question marks out there at the side that you can enter any of the information as far as if they're highly effective or effective or need improvement." Richard, principal at a large high school, explained:

> But the most—again, time-consuming part is actually uploading that information into the evaluation model where we actually have to rate teachers and then for each rating, we have to provide a comment, if it's at a certain level. … when you start multiplying it times, up to 10 teachers, and then each rubric has 20 domains, and there are 5 different levels, and then you have to provide feedback on, in most cases, each level, and basically you're doing that three times a semester—two observations and one evaluation. And you can imagine—that takes up a chunk of time.

These respondents attributed the time-consuming nature of teacher evaluations to the process itself, but others noted the shortcomings of the software they are required to use. Linda, an elementary principal, described her dissatisfaction with her district's new electronic system, and how she refers to a printout of her district's evaluation tool as she works on evaluations:

> [W]e have an online system for that where we can log in, I can go into a classroom, I can take an iPad or my laptop, and I can do it that way. That has not been very effective for me. And so I really had to kind of look at a way to—I always want to streamline everything… so, I kind of have created a system where I—I work better if I have a hardcopy in front of me. And so I've printed out that rubric.

These evaluations are not only time-consuming, but time-sensitive; Richard explained that certain steps, such as post-observation conferences and written reports, must be completed within

a certain window of time after a classroom observation: "if we don't meet certain deadlines, we have to repeat the process." To avoid missing these deadlines, he noted the importance of collaboration among his school's large administrative team: "[W]e don't want to necessarily repeat the process. So we tend to work with each other to say 'Hey, I'm doing an observation. Can you take care of this situation for me?'"

In larger schools, principals reported sharing the teacher evaluation workload with assistant principals, but with notable variations in which teachers they chose to evaluate personally, and how many. Mark, a high school principal with one assistant principal, noted that while he does most of the evaluations, and his assistant principal focuses primarily on discipline, "I give him 20 to 25 percent of our teacher observations and evaluations. I try not to overwhelm him. But he needs to be part of that process." Steven, a middle school principal, noted that he personally completes evaluations for all probationary teachers, and only delegates to his assistant principal the evaluations for "career" or non-probationary teachers—also citing the assistant principal's primary focus on discipline. Richard, working with a team of three assistant principals, said that he makes informal visits to teachers he does not evaluate, so he has a basis for understanding what's happening across classrooms:

And then what we do on a somewhat weekly basis with our administrative team is we have a segment devoted to walkthrough discussion, and that's where we talk about "Hey, I had an opportunity to stop by a particular classroom and observed this, this, and this. Did anyone else see this?" And someone else might say, "Yeah, I was in there on Tuesday morning, and observed the same thing." And then we'll get together—if it's an issue, we'll get together and come up with a plan to address it. Or if it's awesome, we'll basically get a plan together to make sure that teacher is sharing that information with

other teachers in the building, or we may showcase it in our principal points, so the wonderful things that are going on in the building.

As the depth of their comments suggests, principals spend a large amount of time on teacher evaluations, and since this work can typically only be delegated to assistant principals—not secretaries, counselors, or other office staff within the principal activity system—it plays an outsized role in their overall workload. This is especially the case when dealing with staff performance issues.

Dealing with Real and Perceived Staff Performance Issues

In addition to the formal teacher evaluation process, principals also reported spending time dealing with staff performance complaints, from teachers, to custodians, to office staff, and, as noted above, even outside agencies' employees who work on campus. Principals must deal with complaints and problems resulting from staff underperformance, or perceived underperformance. Karen noted that these perceptions among staff are not always aligned with reality, for example, when custodians tally their respective number of rooms and conclude that their peers are not working as hard as they are personally. Linda noted the same issue, that "people are very good at pointing out when other people aren't working as hard as they are, or when that's what they perceive." Principals responded to performance issues that they perceived to be legitimate in a variety of ways, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

State Reports and Other Administrative Tasks

Respondents noted a wide range of administrative tasks that consumed their time, but several themes were evident. First, numerous respondents cited required state reports as a particular burden on their time. Mark acknowledged, with some embarrassment, the degree to which these reports impact his other work:

October [is] when we have all of these reports [due], and some of them, I don't feel

personally they are very beneficial to anything. So when you're doing these reports that

you don't believe in, and it's taking time away from just managing the school or getting

to do observations or walkthroughs and working with teachers, you know, that's a

frustration. … October is a month that in Oklahoma we have a handful of reports that

come, and honestly, as bad as it sounds, some things kind of get set aside. I mean, you

deal with the emergencies, but my walkthroughs and my observations decrease during

that time, because you really have to focus part of what you to do get some of those

things done.

Like teacher evaluations, state-mandated reports are one of the few tasks that principals must

complete on timelines established by external stakeholders, leaving principals with less latitude

to prioritize according to school-based goals. Respondents used a number of strategies to deal

with this constraint, filing reports on time without allowing them to forestall other work. One key

strategy is delegating the completion of these reports, or parts of the process, to other staff.

Steven noted that in many cases, his secretary has the necessary information and can complete

most aspects of certain state reports on her own:

[T]here's several that she can do by herself. I still have to verify what she's doing. She

still has to come to me and say, like a dropout report—we have a dropout report that we

have to do three or four times during the year. And so she comes to me and says "Hey, I

want you to know, I'm sending the dropout report to you. We don't have any dropouts for

this quarter" or whatever. So she will do it, and then of course I have to certify it and

move it on to downtown, to the central office. And then of course they re-certify it,

whatever you call it, and send it on to the state department.

Oklahoma principals cited significant frustration with reports, especially those that are redundant. Mike, a middle school principal, noted that many of these reports are redundant, requiring the school to compile and submit information that is already in the state's possession:

> I could talk to you about our state, and the reports we have to do. There's a lot of redundancy. It just gets to be ridiculous. We do an October 1—we do a huge report that has basically everything that you can use on it. And over, you know, we've got a first quarter statistical report, second quarter, third quarter, and we have to go back in and get the same—you know, the state has that information, because if you put in a wrong number, it tells you that that's a wrong number. … There is so much redundancy in our state reporting. It seems like it's a lot of busywork, is what it is. And it becomes really frustrating for us as administrators out here… But the redundancy on the state reporting, there's a number of reports we do, that they've got all the information. They've got all our discipline. Our discipline all goes into the state through our student information system. And I have to do a report, and the high school principal does too, on discipline, and they've got all the information. I don't know why they can't sort it, or what they need the extra work for.

This information must also be collated in multiple formats; Chuck, another middle school principal, noted that several required reports must be both submitted online and printed and reviewed in person by a regional accreditation officer who visits the school:

> It's frustrating to me, for me and my registrar to have to spend hours compiling a report for our regional accreditation officer to come and audit, and it's regarding whether or not we did our safety drills. Well, I already have to log onto our state website and log whether or not I did my safety drill. So why—and I'm not saying it takes a tremendous

amount of time; it's just an example—why do I have to take the time to go back to your

website, run a report that shows that I did it, so you can then come to my school and look

at it? You could have looked at that from your office in downtown Oklahoma City. I

don't know why they [do] some of that stuff. And the same thing with virtually

everything—I mean, they can log on and look at our attendance. Why do I have to run a

report for you to come here and look at it?

Principals responded to these frustrating requirements by using various delegation strategies,

which are described in Chapter 6.

Inefficient Student Information System Software

An additional productivity frustration, related to state reporting requirements, is the

quality of software such as student information systems. Chuck noted that with "today's database

technology, it's an absolute shame that I can't just type in a query on a database and just

immediately, at my fingertips" have exactly the data he needs for any given report. Several

respondents noted that such technology is readily available, but not in use in their districts. Mike

cited frustration with his school's student information system:

Ours is very time-consuming, especially because I have a lot of discipline issues, that it

seems to take a lot of time, just entering information instead of just using tabs or some

other way. It's—everything opens a new window and it's very time-consuming, and

some of the questions it asks are duplication. And that's kind of frustrating as far as—

cause I try to be out in the halls, I try to be interacting with the students quite a bit, and

sometimes I just get to where you get bogged down in just, doing, entering discipline, and

it becomes a hassle, I guess. … You know, it doesn't seem like a lot, but in the course of

a day, when you're dealing with students and teachers and parents and everything else—

activities going on—it adds up.

He noted that other software, on display by vendors at conferences, appears to offer superior ease

of use, which would save considerable time when entering disciplinary incidents into the student

information system. As Mike's comments illustrate, redundant data entry requirements seemed

to be a particular point of frustration for principals, just as with state reporting requirements.

Waiting on Others to Respond

Principals' work often requires communication and coordination with others, and

respondents repeatedly cited frustration and inefficiency stemming from delays in hearing back

from people they had contacted. R2, a middle school principal, noted that waiting for parents to

return phone calls about discipline issues impedes her productivity:

> I'll call a parent, and they're not there so I leave a message. Well, I'll move on to
>
> something else, so now I've got to go back and catch that phone call when they do call
>
> back because I do want to talk to them. And so those are things you can't control, but it
>
> certainly does impede your efficiency.

She noted that this dynamic occurs with other educators as well—for example, when principals

are coordinating multi-school events:

> I will return an email within 24 hours. That's my goal. That's not everyone's goal. So if I
>
> email another administrator, "Hey, I need to make sure your PTA's bringing food for the
>
> conference next week. What day?" and they don't answer me for three days, so I'm
>
> waiting, and I'm waiting, and I'm waiting. And I can't move forward on my list until I
>
> hear from them.

In other cases, principals reported delays in hearing back from outside entities; for example, during a site visit, Mark was waiting to hear back from a county agency, noting "You get started on these, but can't finish." Even minor issues can create loose ends that take considerable time and attention to resolve. Richard, principal in a large high school, reported considerable difficulty getting teachers to respond to a simple request for information via email:

> I asked teachers to confirm their exact number of years of service to the district. And two weeks later, I'm still trying to track down about 8 teachers…I really just want to know, is the information correct. …really, it's just responding to an email. …it's turned into a two-week task—something that could have taken a day has taken two weeks. And you know, it's going to take me a lot longer—I just know some of the teachers that I'm working with. But that's just…that's just…it is what it is.

This sense of acceptance toward aspects of the job that thwart their productivity—"it is what it is"—was a common theme among respondents, and the phrase itself appeared four separate times in interview transcripts.

Dealing with Interruptions—Mintzberg's "Disturbance Handler" Role

An ever-present challenge for administrators is the need to respond to a wide range of emerging issues involving students, staff, parents, community members, the physical plant, and other factors under the principal's purview. In his classic *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Henry Mintzberg noted that "the manager apparently allows disturbance handling to take priority over most other kinds of activity." (1973, p. 84). He further observes that managerial work does not lend itself to rigidly planned schedules:

> The pressure of the managerial environment does not encourage the development of reflective planners, the classical literature notwithstanding. The job breeds adaptive

information-manipulators who prefer the live, concrete situation. The manager works in an environment of stimulus-response, and he [sic] develops in his work a clear preference for live action. (p. 38)

In schools, these "disturbances" can include a wide range of issues involving students, parents, and staff, and principals expressed a strong preference being interrupted and for dealing with them immediately, rather than putting them off to a more desirable time. This was a somewhat surprising finding, because principals also expressed a desire to plan their work carefully in order to make efficient use of their time. The nature of the principalship, though, is that interruptions must be handled. Richard, principal of a large comprehensive high school, described the unpredictable nature of this work:

[E]very day's a brand new day, and you'll find from working in a school that you never know—you might get a phone call, you might observe something, you might have an issue brought to your attention that could totally change the outlook of your day.

Richard noted that this unpredictability limits his ability to plan how he will use his time:

[Y]ou can have days where—you learn not to really plan to get a whole lot done, because every day, you never know what will happen. And sometimes I jokingly have to stay in my office because some days you feel like you're a magnet and you attract issues— student issues, teacher issues, parent issues, and basically it can change, again, the outlook of your day.

Linda, an elementary principal, noted that these emergencies themselves are not frustrating, because they're simply part of the job, but she is frustrated by being unable to complete work as planned:

I could have the best-laid plans, but that doesn't mean that's the way it's going to happen, so you know, you have all the emergencies that come up, and—I can't say it's really frustrating to me; it's frustrating when I haven't completed something that should have been done.

Similarly, Lance, a middle school principal, noted that "you can set aside time to do something, but you've always got to be ready to jump to plan B if something happens at school." Constant interruptions, he noted, can dramatically increase the time it takes to complete a task:

If I try to do paper—if I try to do a bunch of paperwork and that kind of stuff when I'm constantly getting interrupted, it's not—I'm not getting it done, and it's taking quite—three times as long. Whereas if I just come in couple of hours in the morning, I can get a whole lot more done when I'm by myself, and getting that kind of stuff done.

Steven, a middle school principal, similarly noted that interruptions make it preferable to work on office tasks outside of school hours, in order to remain available to respond to student and staff needs during the school day:

I feel like I'm a whole lot more efficient when teachers or students are not in the building [laughs] kind of like right now. Seems like I can get a whole lot done. I tell my wife all the time, three o'clock, when the kids go home, and teachers go home shortly after that, that's probably the quickest—usually about an hour a half, sometimes two hours, and I'll get out of here about five—those usually are the quickest two hours of the day, but also seems like the most productive. … I just feel like, the things that I do, the things that need to be done, so to speak, with reports and different things like that, just me personally, I feel like that I want to try to do those after everybody leaves, just so that I can be available to everyone during the day.

Steven further noted that repeated interruptions during the school day tend to cause him to lose track of his place in a task, requiring him to start over:

> [T]here's a pretty—a pretty consistent revolving door, between parents, teachers, and kids that I'm dealing with throughout the day. …sometimes it does interrupt what I'm doing, and I don't know about you, but it's one of those things where, you sit down and you start doing something, and somebody comes in, and you kind of lose where you are, and it seems like you kind of, you know, start from the beginning again, and of course, here comes somebody else walking in. So a lot of times, I'll either do as much as I can before an interruption, and I'll just save the work and, you know, I may try to start it again throughout the day, but basically, if I'm interrupted about two times, then I'll probably just wait till the end of the day when everybody's gone to complete it.

Notably, principals did not report resisting interruptions in order to work on scheduled tasks—with the exception of teacher evaluations—preferring instead to be available for others during the school day. Several respondents described how they were advised by peers, mentors, or supervisors to adopt such an open-door policy. Lance reported being "told by my direct supervisor basically, in a nutshell, 'people during the day, and paper after they're gone.'" This advice has proven to be "my best advice I've ever got," allowing him to "get a whole lot more done when I'm by myself." Several respondents noted the ineffectiveness of adopting a "closed-door" policy as a means of reducing interruptions to planned work. Steven, a middle school principal, explained his philosophy:

> I like to keep my door open to where any type—whether it's a kid or teacher or parent for that matter—that needs to talk to me—I'm not a big schedule, you know, schedule-appointment type guy. It's kind of like, hey, you walk in and I'm not going to make you

wait, you're gonna—whatever I'm doing, I'm going to drop, and I'm going to talk to you. So, that philosophy is definitely—definitely cuts into my time, for sure. To answer that question, one of the things that I've tried to do is just close my door and tell secretary, whatever, hey, I've got this report I need to get done. Unless it's an emergency, you know, let me get this completed. And most of the time, it doesn't work out.

This degree of responsiveness—"whatever I'm doing, I'm going to drop, and I'm going to talk to you"—reflects a sense of flexibility that principals understand themselves to have, especially in contrast to teachers and parents, who may have more constrained schedules. Lance, for example, noted that asking parents to make appointments rather than interrupt the principal is not a viable option:

Parents will come in, and our policy is we don't really have appointments, and so—because we know that most people work, and so they'll come in at all times during the day, and you know, when they come, we stop what we're doing and deal with the parents. … The only solution is to shut my door, and that's not going to be good at all. I mean, it's just going to create—I mean, that's going to be more problems. It's not like I don't got to deal with the problem; I just got to deal with them later, so…

This sense of inevitability—that sooner or later, the parent will need to be dealt with—makes the prospect of turning away parents in order to avoid an interruption less practical than simply accepting interruptions as a fact of life. These interruptions come not just from parents, but from staff, too—Lance also noted that teachers have only a single planning period during the school day when they can come and speak with him:

And so they have to feel free to come in and take care of their business, because they don't have the same flexibility that I do, whereas I can easily put stuff down, and, you

know, deal with what's going on. They can't really do that, because they've got—they can't do it in a classroom setting because they've got thirty kids. And the plan time is limited. So sometimes when they need to talk to me, it's got to be kind of on their terms and when they need, but that sometimes interrupts what I'm doing.

Dealing with Complaints and Conflicts

Mintzberg described "conflicts between subordinates" (1973, p. 83) as a category of disturbances that managers must handle, but principals in this study reported involvement in addressing conflicts between a wide range of parties in addition to subordinates, including outside contractors, students, parents, district personnel, and others. As noted above, principals reported having an "open door" policy toward parents who visit the school to resolve various problems, and reported making themselves available to deal with student issues as needed. However, several other sources of complaints, conflicts, and disturbances merit additional discussion.

One source of disturbances is adults working in the school on behalf of other parties. For example, during our site visit, Steven was in the process of dealing with staff complaints about a counselor who worked for an outside counseling agency and had made a string of remarks to teachers about wanting to date them. This made the teachers uncomfortable, and they complained to the principal, culminating in his request to have the counselor replaced by the employing agency. Steven remarked, of this process, "The amount of things we deal with that have nothing to do with education is just mind-blowing." Similarly, Chuck noted during our site visit that he was currently dealing with complaints about soda machines provided by an outside vendor, and about the vendor's employees failing to sign in at the office as required when servicing the soda machines.

Other conflicts involved miscommunications between school and district staff; for example, Richard reported having to resolve a disagreement about whether central office or school-based staff were responsible for keeping track of a career tech funds account:

[I]n the past, the district has monitored that account, from the tracking of the RQs [requisitions] and the POs [purchase orders], who's on a career tech teacher and who's not a career tech, because there are funds associated with it, but there was someone who communicated that that should also be done on the building level, so the building has knowledge of RQs and POs, so on and so forth, as it relates to career tech. So, I ended up having a conversation with both parties to kind of find out backstory on how we've accomplished this task in the past, and basically it's just trying to get all of the facts.

Principals also reported dealing with various conflicts related to school janitors and custodians. While their work sometimes intersects with the work of principals directly, as I will explore in a later chapter, principals are also called upon to resolve issues involving custodians—for example, during our site visit, Steven was asked by one custodian to intervene with local law enforcement about a speeding ticket received that morning by the other custodian, who was speeding through the school zone en route to unlocking the building for students on a very cold morning. Other principals were expected to respond to perceptions of various custodians' work ethic. Discussing a summer campus cleaning project, Mike noted that one custodian in was markedly less effective, leading to complaints from the other custodians and teachers:

I've got one custodian that spends about 70% of her day it seems like just talking to people in the offices, or teaching during their plan hour, and has very little attention to detail. … Well now, the elementary custodians, who do a really good job, are having to work with my custodians, and I've got one that does a good job. The other one is pretty

weak. And they're going to start up here at the high school, and those custodians down

there aren't happy about it. … And I know that there were two teachers that worked with

her last year, and swore they weren't going to do it again this year, because of, she was

on her phone, or she was talking to people while they were working.

Several principals cited the need for custodians to be flexible in order to get the job done. Karen

noted occasional conflicts over "how many rooms they have versus someone else," explaining

that sometimes "with the support staff there's more conflict than there is with my teachers."

Similarly, Paul noted that when a janitor is absent and other must pitch in to help, he sometimes

has to get involved to ensure that everything is taken care of:

It's not a huge deal most of the time, but sometimes I've had to step in and say "Hey, I know so

and so's gone today, but we really—we've got to empty the trash on his side of the building

anyway." And then, same thing goes with, you know, when you're gone, then he's going to have

to—you know, they're usually pretty good about that, but sometimes I do have to step in and say

hey, let's make sure we take care of this before we go home.

Managing New Initiatives and Policy Changes

Another challenge to principal productivity is the sheer number of changes and new

initiatives underway at any given time. Mark noted that these initiatives originate at the federal,

state, and district levels:

We have a superintendent who…does a great job, and he's got a vision, but he has a lot

of ideas, and you know, we tease him that we're still working to get the last idea in.

…And so we're pushed to do a lot of things here. I think it's making our school better,

but that would be the source of the frustration. Sometimes you think, "Man, I don't have

the time just to manage my school anymore because of everything else I have going on."

Several respondents expressed pointed frustration at politically driven changes to their work. Paul described the additional work created by these changes:

> Here in Oklahoma, the last three years we have changed our curriculum standards multiple times. And so every time the state changes it, we get busy, we start working on new curriculum standards and make sure our units fit those curriculum standards, and then the state, the following year, will come back and say no, we've changed our minds, so we're not going to use these curriculum standards any more. So we've done a lot of work for absolutely nothing.

Chuck also expressed frustration at these seemingly pointless changes and added, unfunded mandates:

> [W]e had one legislator that felt like…our country was going to fall off the face of the earth if we didn't test US history. So we're continuing to test US history on a state test, simply because this one guy had enough political cloud to get it pushed through. Not that I think US history or history in general is not important; it's just that, you know, kind of like what I said, the political football that education is and has become, and some of the dumb, pointless, usually unfunded mandates that we have to jump through, again, not because there's any, necessarily, educational value to them, or that there's really any connection to research that says it's going to matter to kids, yet we still end up having to spend money and time to do it.

Respondents also cited federal policy, such as Department of Education guidance on transgender students, as a source of constant change. Two characteristics of these changes emerged as particularly frustrating: first, the sense of wasted effort caused by back-and-forth changes; and

second, the compounded effect of unrelenting new changes, year after year, which adds to the overall demands of the principalship.

Challenges in the Principal-Secretary Relationship

Respondents noted the critical importance of trust and an effective working relationship with an effective administrative assistant. While duties and staffing patterns varied among the settings in this study, respondents each seemed to have one particular administrative assistant with whom they worked most closely, and whom they implicitly trusted with the most important matters. Mark, a high school principal, noted that being able to trust a competent administrative assistant is very important:

> [T]here was a time in my career that I tried to do everything myself, and I have gotten better at passing some duties onto people that I trust. I mean, my secretary takes care of a lot of things for me.

The availability of a trusted administrative assistant to take on part of the principal's workload is discussed at length in Chapter 6. For the purposes of the present discussion, though, the lack of a trustworthy administrative assistant presents a serious threat to principals' success. Chuck, for example, reported having to replace an ineffective registrar years ago, and noted that he "couldn't trust she wouldn't stab me in the back," and thus moved her out of the role.

Having mapped the patterns of challenges and frustrations facing principals in their work, I turn in the following chapter to an exploration of how principals respond to these challenges in order to maximize their productivity in accomplishing the work of leadership.

Chapter 5: How Principals Increase Their Productivity

Having described the challenges and frustrations principals experience in managing their work, I now turn to an examination of the means by which principals in this study strive to increase their productivity, so they can accomplish more work in less time. Findings in this chapter address the following two research questions:

Research Question 2: Strategies, Techniques, & Tools for Productivity—What strategies, techniques, and tools do principals identify as helpful for accomplishing their work in an efficient manner?

Research Question 3: Identifying, Adapting, and Using Strategies, Techniques, & Tools to Increase Efficiency—How do principals identify, adapt, and use these strategies, techniques, and tools to complete their work with increasing efficiency?

A straightforward way in which we might expect principals to increase their productivity is by using tools designed expressly for this purpose, and indeed, respondents reported using a wide variety of productivity tools, including calendars, electronic applications, and hardware devices. However, Activity Theory suggests that these tools occupy a particular role in the *principal activity system*, the unit of analysis for this study (see Chapter 3). Tools mediate the relationship between the *subject* (in this case, the principal) and *object* (the work that needs to be done), transforming it into an *outcome* (finished work). Tools generally play a straightforward role in making work more efficient, though respondents also noted some situations in which they found tools frustrating to use due to various design limitations.

In order to more fully describe how principals strive to complete their work with increasing efficiency, though, it is essential to consider the other mediating relationships in the principal activity system. For example, *rules* mediate the relationship between the *subject* and

community—or more plainly, norms for working together mediate the relationship between the principal and other staff involved in the work of leadership. Finally, the *division of labor* mediates the relationship between the *community* and *object*—in other words, established arrangements for who is responsible for which tasks mediate the various relationships between other staff in the principal activity system and the work itself. We will consider these various relationships in turn in this chapter.

<div align="center">**Strategies, Techniques, & Tools for Productivity**</div>

We will first explore the range of strategies, techniques, and tools that principals reported using to increase their efficiency in accomplishing the work of leadership. Principals often made mention of these tools in reference to specific challenges or frustrations (see the previous chapter); approaches to modifying the use of these approaches to overcome various challenges follow this survey of the approaches themselves.

Using Calendars

Unsurprisingly, principals reported using calendars in a variety of ways to manage their time and coordinate school events. Mark noted that he puts administrative meetings, formal teacher observations, and other appointments on his calendar: "anything that I've got going, I try to get on my calendar." Beyond the obvious purpose of keeping track of meetings so as not to forget or miss them, this helps him plan when he will conduct the numerous required teacher observations: "to spread them out, I try to average four to five a week, so I get those planned." Mark also noted that the degree to which his calendar is filled with meetings provides him with a rough sense of how much other work he'll be able to accomplish.

Managing tasks. Principals also reported using calendars to ensure they devoted attention to certain types of tasks. Julie, an elementary principal, noted that planning tasks such as

"analyzing the data and keeping our campus on track is something I do efficiently" because she plans for them in advance, and "if you're not purposeful, it just doesn't happen." By setting aside time on her calendar, she is able to ensure that she completes important but not urgent tasks. She also noted that she sets aside time for specific tasks on her calendar, explaining that she uses it in lieu of a separate to-do list. She explained that this approach "works a little bit better for me. You know, instead of just having a running to-do list—that way, I just have my calendar to go by, and that way everything gets done in a day." Throughout the day, this strategy reduces her uncertainty about what to work on next: "I know where to go…I write it in my calendar, and that helps me not to forget things, and to stay on task of what I need to do." Other respondents reported using separate tools to keep track of tasks, such as the Google Tasks app, which is integrated with the G Suite for Education that many respondents used.

   Recurring tasks. Karen noted that one specific type of recurring task that must be done during the school day is working with students on their attendance. To ensure that she devotes time to this task, she marks it on her calendar:

>   If kids are tardy to class, my secretary, my attendance secretary, prints me how many tardies kids have to school. And I visit with them and usually give their parents a call. And I also work excessive absences. So to do that, I need kids to be here. So I have to make sure during my day I block off time and make that a priority in the morning, right after the first bell rings for class to start, so that it gets done. Cause as you know, other things creep in during the day, and other meetings and things like that happen as well. So in order for me to be efficient in ensuring kids are getting to class on time and monitoring their attendance, I've gotta make sure I make time to do that.

Paper vs. electronic calendars. Several respondents reported switching from paper to electronic calendars in recent years, yet these transitions weren't always complete. During my site visit, I observed high school principal Mark and his administrative assistant both using paper calendars for various purposes, e.g. to note the date of an athletic competition that the school would be hosting. He explained that while he makes heavy use of Google Calendar, he also continues to use a paper calendar:

> I'm a little bit old school in that I still keep a calendar on my desk, and it's a 3-ring, or a 3-year calendar, and I can't hardly function without it. I've been doing this for a long time, and I've got calendars from years ago, and I like to compare when things happen.

In our earlier phone interview, he explained that he prefers to use this paper desk calendar for tracking school events, but Google Calendar for tracking his personal appointments:

> [J]ust looking at it, I've got all of our athletic activities, I've got a book study scheduled in a couple of weeks, we're doing HIV training for sophomores, we're going to do Coke sales, we've got our ACT test, CPR for seniors—all of those things. So it's kind of a…covers everything. My Google calendar is more me personally. And so I like—I still like having this desk calendar, which is very cluttered, but it's where I make notes, and as I say—and I look at it numerous times every day. It's still used. But the Google Calendar is where I'm going to be at all times.

A major benefit of using an electronic calendar, rather than a traditional paper calendar, is the ability to access it from multiple locations and devices, e.g. desktop computer, laptop computer, mobile phone, or iPad. Mark noted "the main difference is, I have it with me all the time"—unlike a paper calendar, which he generally does not carry with him around campus, his mobile phone gives him access to his calendar at all times. While he reported sometimes taking his

paper desk calendar to meetings, this is less convenient, and introduces the risk of misplacing the calendar, which—unlike an electronic calendar—has no backup. Similarly, R1, who uses Outlook rather than Google Calendar, cited the value of having her calendar information "pushed" to her iPhone.

However, principals expressed some fondness for paper calendars and planners, despite their drawbacks; Julie noted:

> I had a FranklinCovey planner, which was wonderful. It was great. It had a to-do list area, and it had an area for birthdays. I always did the Week at a Glance. I liked to see the Week at a Glance, and also I had a Month at a Glance, and I would have to write on both.

The discipline of writing in the paper planner may have been helpful, but was not without its drawbacks. In addition to the redundancy of having to write out the same events on daily, weekly, and monthly pages, Julie also cited a concern for misplacing the paper planner: "If left that book at home or lost it, I was in trouble." She noted that Outlook allows her to "type it one time, and I can click with a button and see things however I want to see them. I can see it by day, week, month, year, and any device that I have." Compared to recopying in her FranklinCovey planner, she remarked "I think that's definitely helped me save time." Mark reported having bought paper planners for all teachers in previous years, but since his district adopted Google Calendar, he has discontinued this practice.

Mark cited another feature of electronic calendars—invitations—as useful for coordinating meetings with staff in an efficient manner. He noted that staff understand meeting invitations, without any need for a separate explanation, and will reliably show up for meetings they are invited to, even if they personally do not use Google Calendar, because these invitations arrive via email.

Shared access. Several respondents reported taking advantage of the ability to share access to their electronic calendar with key staff. Mark, a high school principal, noted that giving his secretary access to his calendar saves him the trouble of keeping his secretary informed of his whereabouts, explaining "when I'm doing an observation, I don't have to track her down to tell her where I'm going to be. She has it right there." Linda, an elementary principal, explained how she uses several Google calendars to coordinate meetings:

> I include my secretary in my online calendar, and anyone else who it would be pertinent to, so that we're all on the same page. It kind of helps me get to where I'm going. It helps people that needed my time understand why I can't be here, you know, that these are the things that are already on the calendar.

She explained that she keeps a personal electronic calendar as well as a separate special education calendar that she shares with key staff to facilitate the scheduling of meetings and avoid double-booking:

> So anyone that's going to be making an IEP meeting for me, or something like that, they all see what meetings I have, and that's been incredibly helpful, because the speech pathologist doesn't necessarily have the same kids as the special ed teacher, and so a lot of times they would be double-booking me. You know, we—I have set times during the day that I prefer to have meetings. Not that I can't be flexible and do it at another time, but you know, I also have a standing principals' meeting every other week. Well, I don't want them scheduling a meeting on top of that. So, I share that with my counselor, because she serves as the admin rep on meetings at times, my speech pathologist, my special education teachers, my secretary, so that everybody can see.

Linda's enumeration of other staff who have access to her special education calendar illustrates several features of the *principal activity system*. First, it is clear that in the division of labor for this type of leadership work, others have been empowered to schedule these meetings; while others must avoid double-booking her, they are free to schedule these meetings at their own discretion—claiming Linda's time without securing her prior approval. This echoes the Activity Theory concepts of *rules* and the *division of labor*. Second, *tools* mediate the relationship between the principal and the task—or in Activity Theory parlance, the *subject* and the *object*. When an appointment appears on her calendar shared, Linda knows she must attend the special education meeting. This direct form of mediation eliminates the need for additional communication and negotiation; staff can simply book the time they need on her calendar, creating numerous efficiencies for all involved.

  Secretary involvement. Several respondents noted the special role of their secretaries in coordinating their schedules. R2, a middle school principal, said that she referred teachers to her secretary when they asked for her time, rather than agreeing to a time personally and having to update her secretary:

> So people want to talk to me, so my teachers say "hey I need to speak to you about the musical, the dates for the musical." OK, well, talk to [my secretary], get on my calendar. Instead of me saying OK, come see me third hour, not telling her, I have to work through her so she keeps my calendar and she helps keep me going where I need to go.

Similarly, middle school principal Chuck noted that his secretary can see what's on his calendar and keeps him on track throughout the day—or as Karen put it, "[she] keeps my calendar, and I have to do what she says." As with Linda's special education example above, this direct access to the principal's calendar reduces the need to share updates about the principal's schedule

throughout the day, and allows the secretary to play a larger role in allocating principal time, as well as helping the principal adhere to the planned schedule.

Facility use. Other respondents reporting using shared calendars to coordinate facility use and avoid double-booking spaces within the school campus. Chuck, a middle school principal, noted in our site visit that shared Google calendars had taken the place of an inefficient paper-based process for reserving rooms such as the gymnasium for athletic events and other school activities; the prior process, he noted, had required more "legwork" and was less effective at preventing double-booking, since staff could not quickly check on the availability of facilities while attempting to schedule an event. Since principals may be called upon to adjudicate among conflicting demands for space on campus, it follows that making facility calendars available to all staff may result in additional time savings for the principal, since staff will simply choose another time if they see that the facility is already booked. Similarly, Chuck reported using shared calendars to track the timelines for the various fundraisers that take place on campus, to avoid overlap, and thus competition, between fundraisers.

While scheduling decisions may be a relatively minor aspect of principals' overall workloads, Mintzberg's (1973) description of the *disturbance handler* role suggests a hidden benefit of using electronic calendars to coordinate meetings, fundraisers, facility use, and similar matters: avoiding conflicts that must be adjudicated by the principal. This time savings is a particularly clear example of principals acting entrepreneurially—that is, making decisions within their existing scope of discretion and available resources—to accomplish more in the available time. If principals develop long-term solutions like the shared calendars described above, they can spend less time dealing with the occasional but time-consuming disputes among various parties competing for the same time and space.

Using Commercial Hardware & Software Tools for Productivity.

Respondents described their use of a range of electronic software and hardware tools—some built for general or business audiences, and some purpose-built for schools and school administrators specifically. While assessing principals' attitudes toward various tools was outside the scope of this study, respondents frequently offered their opinions of the benefits and drawbacks of the various tools at their disposal, which are noted below.

Hardware tools. All respondents made routine use of an office computer—either desktop or laptop—and a smartphone. Two respondents, Chuck and Mark, were observed to use multiple monitors with their office computers, often displaying reference information such as a calendar or student information system on one screen while working on a primary task, such as email or a document, on the other screen. Mark used a laptop for a teacher observation, but otherwise worked at his office desktop computer.

Cell phones were used in a variety of ways, but often more for messaging than for calls; Steven noted that he dislikes making calls on his cell phone due to poor audio quality, but makes heavy use of it throughout the day:

I would definitely say my cell phone is a big—I use it hourly, if not minute by minute. Just teachers themselves texting me about a question, either about a student or sometimes they'll even text me about coming down to their room to maybe deal with a student. Although obviously they have that capability through intercom, buzzing the office, but sometimes it's one of those situations where they don't necessarily want to make a big deal about it, but they do want me to come down and maybe talk to the kids. So they'll text me that kind of thing. So it would be a whole lot—there'd be a whole lot more obstacles for me, and teachers for that matter, if I didn't have my cell phone. Like I said,

there's pretty constant communication between the teachers and I on—with the cell

phone.

Two respondents, Steven and Linda, reported using the Remind (formerly Remind101) service

from their cell phones to send text messages to staff and parents.

Several respondents cited a strong preference for Apple hardware products, such as the

iPhone, various models of MacBook laptop, iPad, and Apple Watch. Julie noted that her Apple

devices, including her iPhone, iPad, MacBook Pro, and Apple Watch all sync with her district's

Microsoft Outlook calendar, allowing her to receive reminders that keep her on track. Not all

users of Apple products described themselves as across-the-board Apple users; Mike noted "I'm

not a big Apple guy, but I do like my iPad." In contrast, some respondents indicated an extensive

commitment to using Apple products; Chuck went so far as to insisting upon using Apple

products over competing Windows-based products, and purchased MacBooks, iPads, and Apple

TV devices for all teachers, and he used the phrase "I'm an Apple person" to describe his strong

preference for the products. Notably, while nearly all respondents used some non-Apple

products, none expressed a preference for them. This may reflect a difference in attitude toward

technology principals buy with their own money, versus technology purchased by their district;

however, such questions were beyond the scope of this study.

Chuck, a middle school principal, reported a strong preference for using a document

scanner to digitize hardcopy documents and save them to an information management app called

Evernote. While no other respondents reported using this app—which is designed for general and

business audiences—his use of Evernote has several features worth noting. First, he cited it as a

key tool for staying organized:

I'm not an organized person by nature. I have to try hard at it. But my technology is what

allows me to continue to be organized, and I'm an avid Evernote user, which allows me

to, you know, to use my technology to continue to be organized.

Using Evernote with a desktop scanner allows him to digitize virtually all hardcopy documents

rather than save and manage the paper copies:

I've got my Evernote scanner on my desk, and so every—just about everything I get, as

far as a piece of paper—I scan it into Evernote so that I can put in its, you know, its box,

and stay organized, so that when somebody comes to me and says, hey, I brought you this

request for an extra event in the gym, did you get that? I can go to Evernote, I can search,

and I can find that, and figure out whether or not I did what I needed to do, or do what I

needed to do.

He noted that this saves him from having to return to his office to retrieve information, because

the information is accessible from his mobile devices, including his laptop, smartphone, and

iPad.

    Software suites—Microsoft Office & G Suite for Education. All respondents used

Microsoft Office and/or G Suite for Education, Google's competing suite of web-based office

productivity applications. While no direct comparisons between these suites were drawn by

respondents, notable features of principals' use of these suites are worth describing. Microsoft

Office includes a number of productivity apps, including Word (word processor) and Outlook

(email, calendar, and task manager). Google's "G Suite for Education" is comprised of a number

of apps, including Gmail (email), Docs (word processor), Calendar, and Classroom (a learning

management system), among many others. Principals in this study reported making frequent use

of these applications, and cited various features that increase their productivity; Karen, for

example, noted that Outlook helps her remember whom to include in a group email by suggesting additional recipients based on past emailing patterns, such as sending a message to all members of a particular committee. Respondents did not indicate a strong preference for or against using Outlook or Gmail to manage their email, but did identify a number of collaborative features distinguishing Google Docs and Google Calendar from competing applications.

As noted above, shared Google calendars were used by a number of respondents to coordinate their personal schedules, as well as other campus matters such as facility use, athletic events, and fundraisers. While Microsoft Outlook includes similar functionality, no respondents using Outlook noted using shared calendars.

Google Docs allows multiple users to edit a single document, collaboratively in real time. Julie, an elementary principal, noted that this functionality allows staff to collaborate without meeting in person, which is often more convenient:

> And we're able to work on a document together at the same time. Those are things we used to couldn't collaborate as much. We can also collaborate from distance apart, really far apart, too. … before, we would always have to meet in person, which is not always conducive, and we can't do that, and we couldn't work at night necessarily. So now, we can all get on Google Docs at the same time and work on a document.

She noted that this allows for a more optimal use of meeting time, and is faster and more convenient for teachers.

Another feature of Google Docs and the accompanying Google Drive app is the ability to make documents available via shared folders, without having to make paper or even electronic copies. Karen noted that her middle school maintains a digital "red folder" in Google Drive to provide staff with access to key documents, replacing physical red folders that were previously

provided to staff, so they no longer need to "kill a forest" producing photocopies for everyone. In this school, staff used G Suite for Education in addition to Microsoft Office, and noted beneficial features of both suites.

Electronic forms. Middle school principal Chuck notably made extensive use in his school of Google Forms and Sheets to handle a variety of routine operational issues. For example, he instituted a phone call log that students who came to the office to make a phone call were required to use if they did not reach the intended party. This form populated a spreadsheet that a secretary kept open on her computer, so if a parent noticed a missed call from the school and called back, the secretary would have a log entry from the student noting what the call was about—eliminating the need to check with everyone else in the office. A similar process was in place for signing out students via electronic form—which updated a spreadsheet—rather than a paper form on a clipboard. This and other self-service forms were kept open on a kiosk on the counter in the main office for students and visitors to use.

In addition to these student- and parent-facing forms, Chuck had implemented electronic forms for internal processes such as discipline referrals, purchase requests, and technology assistance requests. During our site visit, a student asked for help connecting his phone to the school wifi network; rather than stop what he was doing, Chuck referred him to the office to submit an electronic request, which would be routed automatically to the appropriate person. Each of these systems shared information automatically with all of the relevant parties, eliminating steps such as photocopying forms, creating electronic records of handwritten information, and communicating manually about routine requests. For example, the technology assistance form eliminated the need for Chuck to personally pass information along to the technology support contractor. This efficiency strategy—removing himself from routine

processes that did not need to involve him—was one Chuck used repeatedly with Google Forms and other tools. Since his middle school was relatively small, he observed, people would often view issues with a "small-town mentality"—that is, as isolated cases rather than as patterns that could be handled systematically. Chuck's extensive use of form-driven processes was part of a deliberate effort to help the school become more systematic and less reliant on interrupting others in order to get work done. This effort is described in detail below.

Integration & syncing between tools. The ability to "sync" or remotely access information from multiple devices, or share information across multiple apps, was frequently cited by respondents as a highly useful feature of hardware and software tools. For example, being able to sync her Outlook calendar to her iPhone allowed elementary principal Julie to receive reminders that keep her on task throughout the day. Chuck expressed interested in a forthcoming integration between Google Classroom and his school's student information system. Mike noted that he is able to scan documents and sync them to his iPad for later reading. As with several of the technologies noted above, eliminating the need to manually transfer information between systems creates a sizeable efficiency for principals.

Using school-specific software platforms. In addition to commercial hardware and software built for more general audiences, respondents used a variety of student information systems and data reporting systems built specifically for schools. Mike noted that these data systems allow the sharing of required data between district and the state, obviating the need for schools to manually file reports on this same data; however, to his great frustration, manual reports are still required:

They've got all our discipline. Our discipline all goes into the state through our student information system. And I have to do a report, and the high school principal does too, on

discipline, and they've got all the information. I don't know why they can't sort it, or

what they need the extra work for.

Student information systems were regarded by some respondents (see Chapter 4) as being poorly

designed from a productivity standpoint, leading to much wasted time and frustration.

Another type of software designed specifically for schools is teacher evaluation

management platforms, which were adopted in response to the changes in state teacher

evaluation policies, as noted above. Richard described the process of using TalentEd, an

evaluation management platform:

So basically, during the observation, I'm just making notes of observations, interactions,

the bell-ringer, questioning, observing student engagement, and just making comments in

regards to those. But the most—again, time-consuming part is actually uploading that

information into the evaluation model where we actually have to rate teachers and then

for each rating, we have to provide a comment if it's at a certain level. So I typically do

that afterwards because that's a whole other process, and that's done, you know, after

school, before school, and then in the evenings, if I'm not at a school activity in the week.

Respondents reporting using these platforms successfully, and while completing evaluations was

clearly time-consuming, respondents did not indicate any particular frustrations with the software

or characterize it as a barrier to their productivity (nor as a major time-saver, but more as a

natural accompaniment to the new evaluation policies).

Strategies for Increasing Efficiency

Principals in this study reported a variety of strategies for increasing their productivity, beyond simply using tools to work more efficiently. These approaches reflect the unique properties of the principal activity system.

Diversion

One approach to increasing efficiency involved diverting issues so they require less principal involvement, or even remove the principal from a work process entirely, which might be viewed as the greatest possible increase in productivity—a reduction of the demands placed on the principal's time to zero. During our site visit, as noted above, Chuck responded to a student who needed help connecting his cell phone to the school's wireless network by referring the student to the office to submit an online request for technology assistance using an electronic form. While the principal might be seen by students as a key point person for technology assistance, the mediating role played by the technology ticket system greatly reduced his personal involvement in resolving these issues. The conceptual model provided by Activity Theory (see Figure 2 in Chapter 2) suggests that the division of labor is also salient; having a designated person other than the principal to provide technology support is essential for this system's effective functioning. Thus, two types of mediation are at work in this efficiency-increasing strategy: the *division of labor* mediates the relationship between the *community* (in this case, tech support staff) and the *object* (the task needing to be done—in this case, providing the student with access to the wireless network). When we consider the full activity system involved in accomplishing this work, as Activity Theory suggests we must, the mediating role played by the *rules* (or norms) governing the relationship between the *subject* (principal) and *community* (other staff) also come into view.

When it is not possible to fully remove the principal from a given work process—for example, the process of hiring teachers—another promising approach to increasing efficiency is to divert issues that will not be a good use of the principal's time by using tools that turn what would otherwise be the principal's case-by-case judgment into tools that can be used to make decisions based on clear criteria. Julie, for example, noted that having clearer screening criteria, developed in consultation with her staff, has helped her avoid spending time interviewing candidates who will not be a good fit:

> I don't meet with just anybody that anybody wants to meet with. 'Cause when I first got here, it was like "Oh, you've got to meet this person, she's really great. But, um, my time is just really valuable, so I wanted to make sure that we were meeting with the kind of people we would want to be on staff here, and not wasting everyone's time, so I think it's freed up time… I don't just pull anyone out of the system. They have to have certain criteria now.

These criteria appear in tool form as scoring documents, which she explained "put a number to it, so it's not as subjective…[i]t's a little bit more objective." This has allowed her school to interview only candidates who meet their criteria based on these screening tools, saving a great deal of time in the hiring process.

Implementing New Tools

One notable way principals in this study increased their efficiency is by implementing new tools into their work to make it more efficient. As I have described above, adopting an electronic calendar that can be permanently shared with key staff such as administrative assistants eliminates the ongoing need to communicate about changes in the principal's day-to-day schedule. In some cases, these tools were implemented by principals at their own discretion,

whereas in other cases, outside authorities encouraged or mandated their adoption. Mark, for example, indicated that he began using Google Calendar at the direction of his superintendent, but quickly came to appreciate it:

> I've been doing this for a long time, and I've got calendars from years ago, and I like to compare when things happen. But something that has benefited me a lot, which sounds really small, but our superintendent decided that he wanted us using Google Calendars, and being deliberate about planning our day on it. And, you know, I do the things that I'm asked to do, but it wasn't something I was very excited about. But within just a few days, I realized that I love it.

Another type of tool principals reported adopting at the direction of district or state authorities is teacher evaluation platforms. Respondents reported using several different platforms that had been approved by the state and customized by vendors to work with the state's teacher evaluation system, then adopted at the district level. Because the change in tools accompanied a significant change in evaluation requirements, it was not possible to draw direct comparisons in relative efficiency between using the old paper-based process and using the new purpose-built evaluation systems.

As described above, Chuck made extensive use of Google Forms and similar technologies, such as a helpdesk ticketing system, to modify routine work processes, such as technology requests, purchasing requisitions, maintenance requests, and other processes that had previously involved face-to-face interaction or paper-based communication. Another principal, Lance, used Google Forms to save face-to-face meeting time. Realizing that a great deal of meeting time would be needed to complete state-mandated trainings for staff, on topics such as

blood-borne pathogens, he made the materials provided by the state available via Google Slides, and asked teachers to submit their answers to comprehension questions via Google Forms.

Modifying Tool Use

Replacing manual processes with electronic tools. In addition to adopting new tools, principals in this study reported modifying existing tools to increase their efficiency. Principals expressed a preference for automated, electronic processes, while recognizing that manual or paper-based processes took time to replace. Several respondents raised the issue of student enrollment and registration, which constituted major projects at certain times of year, especially for office staff. Lance highlighted the inefficiency of using paper enrollment packets, which required photocopying, distribution, collection, and manual data entry. His school was forced to address this inefficiency when confronted with staffing changes:

> Because with budget cuts, we lost people, and so we had to retool. And the way it was done in the past was…extremely inefficient. …there was so much time spent on gathering information that could have been gathered electronically, or you know, handing out packets of papers to kids, and then expecting them to bring it all back, and then transferring that packet of papers over to computer. And so, to make it more efficient, we went to an online enrollment system, and we went to—basically everything is electronic now. We're not shuffling, you know, 25 papers per kid. So that's made our process a whole lot quicker. …the whole system's automated now, where it wasn't automated, it was basically hand-entered. I mean, we had a system that was automated, but we didn't use it. We didn't use it to its maximum efficiency.

As he indicates, even though the student enrollment system was already computerized, the process of determining student schedules was paper-based until this change was made. The same

pattern—of a paper-to-computer process being replaced with an all-electronic process—was reflected in Paul's comments about teacher evaluations. He noted that the electronic teacher evaluation management system enables him to eliminate the step of taking handwritten notes:

> [F]or every teacher, they get two observations, and then they get an evaluation after those two observations are complete. … So it's the evaluations that I write later, but those observation forms, I can go ahead and fill in, versus when we used to take it all paper, which was about seven or eight pages…[laughs] Then I'd come in and transfer it onto the computer anyway, so…I was able to eliminate that step.

Paul further noted that while his district provided the software as well as an iPad, he made the decision to purchase an external keyboard so he could type more quickly than with the onscreen keyboard.

However, not all principals discontinued their use of handwritten notes when they adopted an electronic teacher evaluation management system. Mark, a high school principal, brought both his laptop and a paper legal pad with him to a teacher observation during our site visit. He used the electronic system to take detailed notes, as well as to complete the required rating steps, but made brief notes on his legal pad. He indicated that these notes were to help him keep track of salient issues during the lesson and as he prepared for the post-observation conference with the teacher; however, all records that would become part of the teacher's official evaluation were entered directly into the electronic system.

Encouraging staff use of productivity tools. Respondents also encouraged other staff to use various tools for productivity, including electronic forms, electronic calendars, email, the Remind messaging platform, and others. However, principals indicated a reluctance to mandate the use of specific technologies for personal productivity, requiring specific tools only for

the work of leadership.

specific work processes, such as making budget requests and taking attendance. Mark noted that his superintendent expected principals in the district to use Google Calendar, and that as principal he encouraged teachers to use it, but did not require them to do so. For example, staff are accountable for attending meetings that they are invited to via Google Calendar, but not required to RSVP using Google Calendar or any other specific calendar tool. This deference to personal preferences did not extend to work processes involving student data or other district staff; for example, teachers were not given the option of using email or paper rather than the school's student information system to record attendance. Multiple respondents indicated that teachers were expected to read and respond to their email, and they met these expectations, with few exceptions; however, beyond checking their school email account, specific apps or devices were not mandated. As Linda noted, different people prefer different approaches:

> I am a big believer in let's work smarter, not harder [laughs], and so I don't think it can look the same way for everyone, but I do think it's important that you find a system that does work for you.

Respondents noted that tools such as Google Docs could facilitate collaborative work outside of meeting time, reducing the need for face-to-face meetings. Julie noted that she was able to reduce all-staff meetings to one every other month, thanks to the use of electronic tools such as Google Docs and Canvas:

> I uploaded all of the documents they would need that I would normally give out at a faculty meeting, and I would put in there, and…they could do it any time. They didn't have to do it after school on a Wednesday. They could do it at night. But it shows when they log in, and how long they were logged in, and if they did all that they needed to do,

and I could ask little questions…it changed everybody's lives, and people's family lives too improved, I think.

Developing Systematic Approaches

Respondents indicated an expectation that new tools would be accompanied by a learning curve, which might temporarily introduce inefficiencies as they grow accustomed to using the new tools, but which would ultimately lead to greater efficiency. For example, Chuck noted that using Google Classroom, which he was gradually introducing as a school-wide expectation for teachers, could help teachers grade more efficiently, but that these expected efficiencies had not arrived yet:

> I think, um, you know, a lot of it—a lot of it probably is more of a trying to create long-term solutions. So being in this school district for two, working on three years, am I realizing a lot of the efficiencies that some of this stuff will create for me? Probably not at this point. But I would say in this third year, I'm beginning to see some of that stuff take hold, you know what I'm saying? Which will then create less for me. But probably still a little bit early in the transformational process to say that I'm really realizing a whole lot of efficiencies yet.

He noted that "flooding the school with technology," as he was attempting to do, would ultimately increase everyone's efficiency, but that in the short term, it was creating time-consuming tech support issues.

Using common electronic tools for school work processes also appeared to facilitate a shift toward more consistent, transparent, and systematic approaches, as opposed to what Chuck called a "small-town mentality." When he arrived,

[T]he school was very high functioning, but not…there really no systems involved, and

that's a problem with our school, because…I say, having a small-town feel is great, but

having a small-town mentality is detrimental to our success. And we have a lot of those

small-town mentalities that we're fighting and trying to overcome.

For instance, he noted that building maintenance work orders and technology repair work orders

were not currently handled in a systematic or transparent way, and expressed a belief that an

electronic process for tracking these requests could increase accountability:

Again, that small-town mentality. And so I worked with the superintendent on getting

things situated so that when somebody gets on and does a technology ticket, as the

principal, I need to see that technology ticket and what it is, when it went, when it was

fixed, in order to provide a little bit more accountability for our IT contractor, because

there really wasn't any. And so we are doing the same thing. We're looking at getting a

system to track our maintenance work orders, because the same thing happens there. It's

kind of the running joke—when you fill out a work order form, it just goes into the abyss,

and nobody ever knows what happens, and nothing ever really gets fixed, because again,

there's no system there, and nobody really knows what the maintenance department's

doing or not doing.

Chuck was careful to point out that these shortcomings of the current process were not due to

laziness or ineptness on the part of technology or facilities workers, but rather the lack of an

effective system. In the absence of such a system, staff adapt to non-systematic approaches such

as prioritizing work based on interruptions and verbal requests:

I think they have just begun to kind of learn and get comfortable with the fact that yes,

the middle school put in a request to have a light fixed, but we're busy doing [something

else], and we're going to keep doing this. And it's not that I think they're just not doing anything; there's just no system or organization to the way that they do stuff. And so if they walk through the elementary, if somebody grabs them and says "Hey, my light's out," everything is dropped and they go fix that light, even though the middle school light has been requested two months ago.

Chuck's efforts evoke several Activity Theory concepts, including *norms*, which mediate the relationship between the *subject*—generally speaking, an individual—and others in the same activity system, the *community*. In Activity Theory terms, Chuck's attempts to systematize these processes in his school can be seen as an effort to increase the mediating role played by *tools*. Using tools to alter the way people work together echoes Wenger's conception of *reification*, "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'" (1998, p. 58). This approach stands in contrast to norms-only approaches, which may not adequately address the challenges faced by staff in carrying out their work. For example, if custodians are told to respond only to written requests, and to ignore interruptions and verbal requests from staff, this may place them in an untenable situation when faced with emergency requests. Having a system, and directing people to use that system in all but the most urgent emergency situations, can alleviate some of the uncertainties and poor prioritization decisions that result from less systematic approaches, as Chuck notes.

Modifying Staff Norms, Roles, and Responsibilities

Given that the work of principals, represented in Figure 2 by the activity system model, frequently involves other staff, it comes as no surprise that many of principals' efforts to increase their own efficiency involved making changes to the work of other staff, especially office staff such as administrative assistants, counselors, assistant principals, and others in non-teaching

roles. These efforts to increase efficiency, often via adjusting the division of labor and delegating tasks, are described at length in the following chapter. Respondents also frequently cited the importance of teacher team leaders, though the responsibilities of these leaders were quite different from those of office staff, often involving the implementation of change initiatives such as Professional Learning Communities. Respondents reported less delegation to teacher team leaders, and greater involvement of teacher leaders in making decisions relevant to teaching and learning. These issues are also explored at length in the following chapter.

Preventing Wasted Time

A final category of efforts to increase efficiency is the elimination of wasted time, effort, and resources. Respondents cited a number of approaches, including reducing unnecessary meetings, avoid re-work due to missed deadlines, and improving notably inefficient processes.

Meetings. Principals reported a preference for avoiding unnecessary meetings whenever possible. Karen noted that distributing information via email or team leaders is preferable to distributing this same information in a face-to-face faculty meeting. Lance noted that "teachers can read, so anything they can read, I can have them read, and go through it on their own." Several respondents, including Lance and Mark, reported sending a regular staff newsletter to update staff with new information on a consistent basis. Respondents noted that out-of-building meetings represent a particular burden on their productivity, due to the required travel time. Karen noted that she would prefer to have these meetings limited to two specific days a week, so other days can remain free for in-building work. Richard noted that these meetings are not always relevant to his specific building or role, and that the information could be communicated in a more efficient way.

Ensuring evaluation deadlines are met. Another major category of waste is re-work, e.g. having to repeat steps in the teacher evaluation process due to missed deadlines. Richard noted that this creates a powerful incentive for administrators in his large school to work together to ensure that they meet deadlines:

> [W]e also have to provide them [teachers] feedback within a 5-day window…if you don't meet the deadline in Oklahoma, basically, the evaluation is void, and you basically have to repeat the process and keep it within that 5-day window. …And we don't want to necessarily repeat the process. So we tend to work with each other to say "Hey, I'm doing an observation. Can you take care of this situation for me?"

Richard described at length his process for scheduling observations so that the preconference, observation, written feedback, and postconferences are completed within the required timeframes, and noted that teachers do not always get to choose their preferred observation time due to these constraints.

Improving inefficient processes/systems. Inefficient processes and systems represent another category of waste described by respondents. As noted above, replacing paper-based steps in work processes with fully electronic processes can create significant efficiencies, saving the time and effort involved in photocopying, collecting, collating, and entering information. While many of these processes do not directly involve principals—for example, principals typically do not assist with data entry for student registration—respondents identified these processes as worthy of their attention because they consume the time of other office staff such as secretaries

and counselors. This impacts the ability of these staff members to assist with other principal

tasks; thus, it is within the scope of this study.

As organizational leaders, principals took an interest in reducing wasteful processes,

especially those that involved large numbers of staff. For example, Lance, a middle school

principal, identified an opportunity to reduce irrelevant emails to teachers, while also involving

fewer people in the process of dealing with in-school detention (ISD):

> We had our in-school detention going through about three different people before it got to
>
> the ISD lady. So I just basically took out the two middle people, and now the ISD lady
>
> will enter the information for me, so she's getting directly that we've sent these kids to
>
> in-school detention, and then she contacts the teachers to say "I need these works for this
>
> kid." … Whereas in the past, we'd send something to the whole staff, saying "Jimmy
>
> John is in in-school [detention]. If you have him, please send work to so-and-so." And
>
> then another lady would enter it in the attendance. And another lady would enter it
>
> somewhere else, so it was going through three to four different channels by the time it got
>
> to the ISD lady. …she's responsible for communicating to only those teachers that have
>
> that kid. So now everybody's mailbox isn't getting filled up.

He noted that when he became principal of the school, he observed that many work processes

had developed over time, resulting in redundancy, inefficiency, and unnecessary work: "I

inherited an office staff that has been here forever, so sometimes things just became 'this is what

someone does.' And you don't really know why." He noted that in some cases, staff were

resistant to changing these practices, whereas in other cases, inefficient processes persisted

simply because staff were continuing to carry out the duties they had been assigned. To get a

clear sense of these duties, Lance asked staff—including department chairs, the curriculum

director, and counselors, as well as administrative assistants—to list their "key responsibility

areas" or KRAs, in writing, and identify processes that could be eliminated or revised to be more

efficient. He also used this information to reallocate responsibilities in order to balance

workloads among staff, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

     Communicating face-to-face. Finally, respondents specifically identified face-to-face

communication as a means of reducing wasted time. While email and other forms of electronic

communication and collaboration may save time in some circumstances, respondents identified a

range of situations in which face-to-face communication was not only more appropriate, but

more efficient as well. Elementary principal Linda noted that she is most efficient in face-to-face

interactions. Because she tends to be very direct when responding to email, this can result in

miscommunications over sensitive matters:

> [P]eople will use email to say things they would never say to your face…you have to be
>
> thoughtful about that, and it's a frustration, as far as trying to encourage my teachers not
>
> to always use email. You know, if you have something negative to say, email is not the
>
> best way to go about that. You know, because what happens is, mom reads it now, then
>
> she reads it in a little bit, she forwards it to dad, now he's really hot, they forward it to the
>
> neighbors…

Similarly, middle school principal Steven stated a preference for face-to-face conversations,

compared to email, text, or phone communication. He noted that this conflicts with advice he has

received about protecting his time by refusing to meet with parents and teachers:

> I've had bosses before that definitely have told me that, you know, hey, you're just going
>
> to have to tell teachers that you have things to do, and you can't go down to their room
>
> every time they call. I just can't bring myself to do that. I want to be available to them,

at—maybe not at all costs, but pretty close. …I feel like that's just doing the right thing; whether that's inefficient or not is kind of immaterial to me.

However, such face-to-face conversations, in addition to being "the right thing" to do, may also save time and prevent issues from escalating. High school principal Richard noted that his greatest productivity strategy is "actually getting in the building and getting into classrooms and actually meeting with teachers face-to-face." He explained:

I think it's increased personalization, you know, with emails, not very personable. Things are misinterpreted quite often. And sometimes you don't get a sense of the tone of an email, and you may, like I said, send an email, and in some cases, you just get to the bare bones of the issue or the particular need, and sometimes those are misinterpreted. Versus, hey, if I'm going to go up to your classroom, you know, I could share the same expectation, but also give some rationale, and maybe explain some reasoning, and sometimes in an email, that sounds like you're just going on and on and one. But face to face, you can be clear on the tone, that it's not a big deal, but it's very important that I have this information, or very important that we get this situation addressed before we have to—it escalates to the next level. So you're able to communicate more efficiently and effectively in person.

Having explored the range of means by which principals strive to increase their efficiency—by using calendars, hardware and software tools, systematic approaches that involve only the necessary people, and other strategies described in this chapter—we turn in the following chapter to the distributed and social nature of the work of leadership, and how principals manage the *principal activity system* to efficiently accomplish this work with others.

Chapter 6: Accomplishing Leadership Work with Others

Having described the challenges principals face in managing their work, as well as the productivity strategies by which principals strive to overcome these challenges, I turn now to the question of how others are involved in the principal's leadership work. This question explores the contributions of other staff who participate in the *principal activity system*, which Activity Theory suggests is the most appropriate unit of analysis for a study of this type. This is the first of two chapters focusing on my final research question:

Research Question 4: Accomplishing Leadership Work with Others—How do principals negotiate and manage the explicit and implicit division of labor, as well as the social rules and interpersonal norms that impact how people work together, in order to ensure the efficient execution of the work of leadership by all involved?

In this chapter, I will discuss the role of a shared vision; how principals work with assistant principals; how they work with secretaries, counselors, and other key office staff; and how they delegate and modify the division of labor within the principal activity system. In the following chapter, I will discuss the role of teacher leaders such as department heads and team leaders.

Creating a Shared Vision

Respondents identified the creation of a shared vision as an important means by which they accomplished their leadership work. While the principal plays a uniquely important role, respondents recognized that their ability to accomplish the work of leadership depends on their ability to enlist and engage staff in shared efforts, or what Wenger (1998) terms *joint enterprise*. Chuck, a middle school principal, said he believes that

when we're able to convey to people why we do what we do, we stand a whole lot better

chance of being successful in our leadership positions. So the more that I can convey and

convince and help teachers see why we do what we do, not just that it's important to have

certain classroom management techniques, but really getting down to the nitty gritty of

why do we do that, and how does the rubber actually meet the road? … I don't want to

just tell people what to do, I want to empower them to learn why we do it, how we do it,

and the value of doing it in a certain way, so that they develop as their own leaders within

the school, and not just because I'm there telling them what to do.

He identified 1:1 conversations with teachers, based on observation in their classrooms, as

essential for developing this shared vision. He noted that whole-staff discussions and training

may provide information, but teachers must "connect the dots" in their own classrooms:

And we can talk about the importance of our PLCs. And we can talk about the details of

what I expect them to be doing. And that is important—you have to lay it out. But I think

it's the opportunities where I can come by the teacher's classroom, and I can see that

formative assessment happening, and then talk to the teacher afterward, and they're

saying "Wow, I never would have thought that kid wouldn't understand what I was

saying," and then I can begin to connect the dots, and see, this is why we were talking

about the PLC stuff.

He noted that changes such as PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) must be introduced

gradually over time, with multiple opportunities for teachers to make sense of new approaches,

and see the links between various initiatives, such as PLCs and technology adoptions. He

recounted a situation in which a science teacher recognized this approach and articulated her

understanding of how he was striving to bring about change:

[W]e were in a technology training, and she looks at me and says, "I get what you're

doing. You're really good at telling us things, and then just slowly bringing us along, and

then connecting the dots for us in our time, instead of you just cramming it down our

throats and saying, 'here's what you do, now get it done and you're going to be in trouble

if you don't get it done.'" And so I think it's about laying the foundation of, again, of the

why we do what we do, and why we're beginning to embark on some of these initiatives,

that lays the groundwork…leading them, and allowing them to kind of learn through their

experiences, instead of me just sitting down and telling them everything all in one sitting.

Because then they're overwhelmed, and half of them shut me out, because they—it's too

scary, or it's too big of a chance. But again, just coaching them along and helping them

understand why.

Similarly, Richard, a high school principal, cited the importance of "just visiting teachers and

talking with them face-to-face" as a key to enlisting teachers in change efforts:

[I]f I'm going to go up to your classroom, you know, I could share the same expectation,

but also give some rationale, and maybe explain some reasoning, and sometimes in an

email, that sounds like you're just going on and on and on. But face to face, you can be

clear on the tone…you're able to communicate more efficiently and effectively in person.

One noteworthy variation on this approach was observed in a site visit with Steven, a middle

school principal who was working with his district's technology coach to roll out a 1:1 Android

tablet initiative. During our site visit, he spent several hours organizing and distributing the

tablets to teachers. While the technology coach was clearly capable of handling this aspect of the

project, Steven indicated that he was involving himself because he felt that teachers would take

the tablet initiative more seriously if he was personally involved. He engaged in brief

conversations with teachers as he went around to their classrooms, inquiring about what they needed—such as power strips for charging the devices—and answering their questions about how to issue the devices to students. While his involvement in physically distributing the tablets to classrooms was not necessary from a practical standpoint, it had the effect of providing him with more detailed information about logistical issues as well as teachers' perceptions of the initiative, and allowed him to communicate expectations and his own commitment to teachers more clearly than, say, a written memo alone. Drawing on Mintzberg (1973), it is worth noting that Steven played both *informational* and *symbolic* roles in the tablet initiative by involving himself in this way. In Activity Theory terms, we might view Steven's involvement in distributing the devices as an effort to extend the *principal activity system* to the logistics of tablet initiative, whereas without this intentional effort, it would have fallen outside the scope of the principal's leadership work. The vision for the initiative was certainly within the bounds of the principal's work, but the logistics of distributing devices was more than adequately handled by the technology coach. Because he wanted to lend the initiative the symbolic support of his personal involvement, he decided to spend time passing out tablets and dealing with power strips, rather than allow the technology coach to handle these details on her own. In efficiency terms, he judged this to be time well spent, compared to, for example, merely sending an email about the initiative.

Working with Assistant Principals

While not all schools have assistant principals, several respondents worked closely one or more assistant principals, and the characteristics of these working relationships merit special consideration due to the large degree of overlap between the *principal activity system* and the work of assistant principals. As licensed administrators, assistant principals are able to make

decisions and take actions that are complementary to, but notably different from, the role of the school secretary. One middle school principal, Steven, noted that he and his assistant principal, whom he invited to join our final conversation at the end of our site visit, "share a similar vision of what school should be like." This shared vision allows them to arrive at similar conclusions when making decisions, e.g. about athletics or student discipline.

Another notable area of shared responsibility among administrators is teacher supervision and evaluation—while each teacher has a designated evaluator, respondents reported some sharing of information about teacher practice among their admin teams. Richard, principal of a large high school with multiple administrators, explained his school's practice:

> [T]hen what we do on a somewhat weekly basis with our administrative team is we have a segment devoted to walkthrough discussion, and that's where we talk about "Hey, I had an opportunity to stop by a particular classroom and observed this, this, and this. Did anyone else see this?" And someone else might say, "Yeah, I was in there on Tuesday morning, and observed the same thing." And then we'll get together—if it's an issue, we'll get together and come up with a plan to address it. Or if it's awesome, we'll basically get a plan together to make sure that teacher is sharing that information with other teachers in the building, or we may showcase it in our principal points…the wonderful things that are going on in the building.

Respondents indicated that responsibility for completing teacher evaluations is shared among the principal and assistant principal(s), but not always in a proportional manner. Mark, a high school principal with one assistant principal, noted that he does the majority of teacher evaluations, delegating 20 to 25 percent to the assistant principal, commenting "I try not to overwhelm him. But he needs to be part of that process." Middle school principal Steven noted that he also does a

majority of the teacher evaluations in his school, including all evaluations for probationary teachers, who have not yet become "career" teachers.

Despite the considerable areas of overlap with assistant principals, respondents also identified ways in which their work differs by virtue of their role as the senior administrator in the building. Mark noted that he is delegating more and more to his assistant principal, to "allow me to have more time to do the instructional leadership part." Additional dimensions of delegation are discussed below, but one other notable area of responsibility frequently delegated to assistant principals is discipline. In all cases, respondents who had an assistant principal indicated that their assistant principal serves as the primary staff member in charge of student discipline. Both Steven and Mark reported that they sometimes refer staff to the assistant principal directly, rather than personally take a report of a discipline situation and delegate it to the assistant principal themselves. Steven noted that his assistant principal handles "80%" of the discipline, though they communicate frequently throughout the day about various discipline matters:

> I usually try to help him out with discipline as much as I can. That's primarily his responsibility, but I was an assistant [principal] at the high school for two years, and so I remember very well how hectic that can be when you're the only one that's doing discipline. [Laughs] So I try to help him out as much as possible.

During our site visit, they frequently shared updates about recent incidents and ongoing investigations, as well as their reasoning about the best course of action in various situations. Through this frequent verbal communication, they ensured that they were in agreement about the appropriate course of action to take in various situations, e.g. whether to file a police report about a recent vandalism issue. In several cases, the principal and assistant principal worked together to

address serious or complex discipline situations; during our site visit, Steven and his assistant principal conducted joint interviews of students to gain a clear overall picture of the vandalism incident. However, the details of dealing with the situation, such as contacting the parents of individual students, were left to the assistant principal.

Working with Key Office Staff

While not all schools have assistant principals, every school in this study had one or more administrative assistants, school secretaries, or other staff who worked closely with the principal, and numerous features of these relationships merit discussion. While the patterns in each school were unique, most schools had several office staff of varying title and role, performing some tasks independently, and in other cases working closely with the principal on shared responsibilities. Job titles included administrative assistant, receptionist, secretary, attendance secretary, fiscal clerk, counselor, and registrar, among others. This role is characterized by trust—trust to maintain confidentiality, and trust to follow through on assigned tasks in a competent manner.

Respondents often discussed the importance of being able to trust office staff by making references to past situations in which trust was lacking. For example, Chuck noted, of a previous principal secretary who had since been replaced, that he "couldn't trust she wouldn't stab me in the back." He noted that he was unable to confidently delegate tasks to her, and quickly replaced her with a retired math teacher. Respondents gave numerous examples of situations in which they had replaced or reassigned office staff in order to obtain trustworthy help; Mike noted that his secretary had previously served as the school custodian for many years.

Several respondents indicated working closely with a particular administrative assistant they referred to as "my secretary" as opposed to other office staff, such as the receptionist,

registrar, or counselors; however, the precise title of the person who served as the principal's most trusted office staffer varied. At the elementary level, this staff member was sometimes an administrative assistant who bore primary responsibility for the budget and personnel matters; at the secondary level, it was sometimes a registrar. In some cases, this secretary is fully entrusted with virtually any information known to the principal, e.g. the contents of the principal's calendar and even the substance of private conversations. Linda, an elementary principal, actually turned to her secretary during our phone interview to ask precisely how many staff members they had, quipping "See? That's just the kind of secretary she is. She just spouts it off." She noted that her secretary keeps her organized, making sure that she follows through on important tasks, and refocusing her as needed.

Several areas of responsibility were notably shared among the principal and a key secretary in a number of schools in this study, including dealing with student attendance, managing the school budget, and ensuring coverage for absent staff. Steven characterized the work of his administrative assistant as leadership work, noting that "she steps into an administrative role sometimes…dealing with teacher leave, and accounts, and spending money, those type of things. She definitely steps in a leadership role there." During our site visit, Steven personally arranged some coverage for absent staff, updating office staff as new coverage plans were made. He also worked closely with his administrative assistant, as well as counselors, on student attendance issues. During another site visit, Mark and his secretary repeatedly discussed budget and staff coverage issues throughout the day. Julie noted that day-to-day management of the staff budget is something she has delegated to her secretary. In several of these cases, such as Karen's handling of attendance, the secretary would provide information—such as an attendance report—and the principal would take the appropriate actions, such as speaking with students and

parents about attendance problems. This sharing of responsibility for many tasks reflects the "Activity System" model described earlier in Figure 2.

Trusted office staff were both charged with protecting the principal's time and empowered to interrupt the principal when warranted. Middle school principal Mike noted that his secretary has full access to his calendar, and even has an iPad, because "it does help when everybody's on [the same platform]." Steven noted that because of their long working relationship, both of his secretaries know when it's appropriate to interrupt him even if his door is closed:

> Somebody from the outside would probably say…typically [when] "the boss" closes the door, you don't interrupt him unless the building's burning down. It's just not that way. I actually have two secretaries. One is the—deals with the accounts, the monies and all that kind of stuff—subs, and you know, leave slips and all that kind of stuff. And then we have a front-end secretary that does primarily attendance. So both of them are kind of that way. I've had their kids in class, I've coached them, those type of things.

He explained that because he does not close his office door very often, it signals a serious situation when he does; even so, his secretaries know when to interrupt him and when not to, based on what he's working on and what the interruption is about.

Several respondents reported that they have fully delegated responsibility for scheduling their time to their secretary, to the extent that, as Karen put it, "[she] keeps my calendar, and I have to do what she says." The secretary is so completely entrusted with responsibility for managing the principal's schedule that the principal herself will not make appointments with teachers:

So [if] people want to talk to me—so my teachers say "Hey, I need to speak to you about the musical, the dates for the musical." OK, well, talk to her [secretary], get on my calendar. Instead of me saying OK, come see me third hour, not telling her [secretary], I have to work through her so she keeps my calendar and she helps keep me going where I need to go.

While it might seem to create an extra step to refer teachers to the secretary to make an appointment, as Karen explains, this actually eliminates the step of the principal having to share new appointments with the secretary to keep the schedule up-to-date. Delegating control of the principal's time to the secretary also allows the secretary to screen calls and visitors, making decisions about who should be able to speak with the principal, when, and how to adjust the schedule in response to such changes.

Though administrative assistants and other office staff are not administrators in the same sense as principals and assistant principals, they play a central role in the work of school leaders, by virtue of their close proximity and deep involvement in managing information; coordinating schedules, budgets, staffing, and other resources; making initial decisions on behalf of administrators; and taking on delegated tasks. Insofar as the *principal activity system* bounds the leadership work of principals, administrative assistants and similar office staff play an enormously important role in this system, as evidenced by the challenges principals face when they lack trustworthy office staff.

Properties & Dimensions of Delegation of Leadership Work

The practice of delegating—or adjusting the division of labor for—leadership work deserves special treatment. While principals readily gave examples of adjustments they made to the division of labor for a wide range of tasks, leadership work is of particular relevance in this

study because the principal *activity system* (see Figure 2) is treated as the unit of analysis. A discussion of the properties and dimensions of delegation of leadership work follows. While principal respondents spoke to a wide range of issues related to managing the division of labor among non-teaching staff, this discussion will focus on "leadership work" as opposed to office administration tasks, with "leadership work" defined as *work that principals personally become involved in.* Middle school principal Chuck noted that being able to delegate leadership work with confidence is extremely important:

> I think my registrar is somebody that I delegate a tremendous amount of stuff to. And when I say stuff, I mean the managerial side of things, because that's stuff that I see that is like the ball and chain around the principal's leg, when he's trying to do that important stuff, such as student relationships, and teacher leadership, but that's got to be done. And so my relationship with my registrar is extremely important, and I would say is extremely solid. And that allows me to say, oh, for instance, I got an email the other day from our superintendent on what the RAO, our regional accreditation officer, was going to request at our March audit. And I'm confident enough in my registrar, and she does—she's the one that helps me with all of those state reports, that I can just forward that email to her, and really not give it much other thought, and know that she's either going to be capable of getting it done, or she's going to come back to me because she doesn't know how to do something. But just knowing that something even on that important, that I can just forward it on to her, and that it's going to get done.

However, it is a skill that must be learned. Karen, a middle school principal, pointed out that sometimes an excellent secretary can help a principal learn to delegate effectively:

That's something that I didn't do well. One thing I noticed when you go to principal school and take administrator classes—they don't teach you how to use a secretary, and how to delegate. Because as a classroom teacher, you did it. You did everything. And so I remember seven years ago I did not know how to use my secretary, and she was very sweet, and she had been an administrative assistant before, and she's like "…I can really do more for you than answer the phone." I said, "Well, what does that look like?"

Mike, another middle school principal, noted that "being more specific with my expectations, not assuming that they knew" is essential for effective delegation—a skill he learned prior to his career as an educator, when he worked in restaurant management. He noted that clear, up-front communication minimizes mistakes and wasted time:

I try to build on the positives, and let them know where the mistakes are, but focus more on the positives, and try to build that relationship, so we are on the same page. And so that in the future, we don't have those miscommunication[s]…they understand my expectations.

Delegation, then, is not merely an offloading of undesirable or time-consuming tasks to subordinates; it requires a deep understanding of the strengths of staff, the workloads they currently face, and the work to be delegated, which I will explore throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Delegating Minor Decisions

At the most basic level, respondents cited a desire to delegate the authority to make minor decisions which they felt were generally not serious enough to warrant their personal attention. Karen, a middle school principal, noted that she was overwhelmed by requests from staff seeking

permission for minor issues, such as supply purchases, in her early years at the school. Now, she says,

> I just try to empower my teachers. …they have expectations, but they also know that I
> trust them to make good decisions. And so, they don't have to run everything by me. Yes,
> I'm the principal, but I trust them to make good decisions. If for some reason they can't,
> …I can pull back and say hey, you know what, next time, we might need to talk about
> this a little more. But I feel like when you empower teachers, they take ownership in that,
> and they're glad to do it.

She cited the importance of building trust, treating staff like adults, and setting expectations as helpful for empowering teachers to make decisions on their own, reducing the demands that these issues place on her time.

Maintaining Oversight of Delegated Tasks

Respondents noted that they are not always able to fully distance themselves from delegated tasks. Principals may be called upon to provide information, make decisions, or clarify aspects of work that has been delegated to others. Even when they fully trust others to handle delegated tasks, ultimate responsibility may still fall to the principal. Mike, who delegated student placement in advanced math courses to a math teacher, stated that he is still monitoring the progress of 8th graders placed in Algebra I. Middle school principal Chuck noted that he delegates the completion of many reports to his registrar, whom he trusts to complete them competently and on time; however, he clarified that the ultimate responsibility is still his, and for this reason, he checks in to ensure that all reports are completed:

> I do check in, you know what I'm saying? Just, "Hey, that report's going to be due on the
> 28th; where we at?" And she's going to say "It's done." Great. Or "It's not done, but I

should have it done by the end of the week." So it's not that I don't kind of progress-monitor the different things that I have to delegate to her, because I have a duty to know, you know, if my superintendent comes in and says "Hey, is that report done yet?" I can't just look at him and say "I don't know, that's not my problem." But yet I still don't have to…let that weight on me, that, oh my gosh, these reports are due on the 28th, and are they done? Or are they going to get done?

He noted that a key facet of this delegation relationship is that his registrar can come to him with any questions—for example, if she needs information or clarifications to complete the report. Despite his continued involvement, this arrangement saves him from being "bogged down" with managerial work:

> [H]aving those kind of people around, I think, is incredibly important to a principal's success, because those [reports] are the things that can bog you down so much…and gosh, end up making you more of a manager as opposed to a leader of any kind.

As Mintzberg (1973) notes, it would be inappropriate to characterize this managerial work as not being the principal's work, because the principal is in fact involved in it, and is literally the manager of this work. However, it can serve as a "ball and chain around the principal's leg," as Chuck noted, so delegation is essential.

In other cases, respondents reported being able to completely delegate responsibility for specific areas to other staff, even if official responsibility rests with the principal. Karen, a middle school principal, noted that one of her two assistant principals now handles all state reports, and she trusts his competence in completing these reports so completely that she does not feel the need to become involved or double-check these reports:

When that [report] gets emailed out from the district level, like, do I email that to you or
to Mr. [assistant principal]? I said, you email that to Mr. [assistant principal]. I don't even
want to see it. So, I've learned to let some things go, which has been really hard, because
I tend to want to control everything. So I think you just have to learn how to do that, and
it takes time to do that, but if you can learn to delegate, you can be very, very productive
in doing other things.

Other respondents described a similar dynamic of being confident in fully delegating
responsibility for a given matter to another staff member, even while remaining personally
accountable for the outcome. While Richard noted that he is ultimately responsible for state
testing and must certify that the process is conducted according to state requirements, he trusts
others to handle the details competently:

I'm the last person to sign off that all protocols and procedures were followed to the T,
which means I have to ensure that we follow all the expectations, which means I'm a
little less, not as involved in a lot of the details, because I have to be the person who
monitors the entire, you know, project.

Part of his confidence in staff stems from the extensive documentation of testing procedures,
which are compiled in a folder known as the "testing bible," which is

a blueprint which we'd been building for years, because it's always been kind of a team
approach. We have a "many hands make light work" approach to testing. … We refer to
it as the "testing bible," but it's basically just a folder that we've built over the years, that
basically says "on this day, we're going to send out this form, we're going to need this
information, this is when—on another day, this is when we send this particular email to
teachers, we need this action step on this day, we're going to start asking for monitors on

this day, we're going to have…" So it's basically, kind of turns into a step-by-step, if you

just follow the plan, you can execute testing. And we update the forms each year, and

again, if we can follow the plan, it typically works.

This "testing bible" addresses a key challenge to effective delegation—a lack of expertise—an

issue which I will now address.

Ineffective Delegation Due to Lack of Expertise

Not all respondents found the same kinds of delegation to be effective in saving them

time. Another middle school principal, Lance, spoke to precisely the same kinds of reports that

Chuck described above, but stated that delegating responsibility for reports to his registrar turned

out not to save him time, because he was the only one with the necessary information:

Well, the registrar used to handle the reporting, like the accreditation reports. So the

principal would find the information, and the principal would give it to the registrar, and

the registrar would then try to—there'd just be this ongoing back-and-forth. And I found

it more efficient if I just do it, because I knew what I was looking for and what I was

doing. Whereas that wasn't really her area of expertise. …her coming to me 15 times a

day, saying "I don't understand what this means, I don't understand what this means."

It's easier for me to do it. Saves both of us a whole ton of time. Because I wasn't saving

any time by giving—delegating it to her, because it was things I would have to do

anyway, so… it just became one of the things that I took off of her plate, so that she

could do some of the other things that I needed her to do, as far as getting kids enrolled,

and getting them in classes, and that kind of stuff.

What can we make of these two middle school principals who found very different results when

attempting to delegate report completion to their registrars? One notable difference in these

delegation scenarios is the ability of the registrar to understand what each report requires and independently obtain the information necessary for completing the report. As Lance points out, if the registrar is not clear on what information is being requested, or where to find this information, this results in numerous inquiries to the principal, negating the time saved by delegation. Chuck's registrar appeared to have the necessary expertise and information, so that she was able to complete these same reports more independently, whereas Lance's registrar seemed to lack this expertise—about both what the reports require, and where to find the necessary information. This contrast suggests that the expertise of staff plays a major role in principals' ability to delegate effectively.

Training Staff and Protecting Their Time to Facilitate Delegation

When staff lack the necessary expertise to allow a task to be delegated to them, principals can invest in training to build their capacity to accept delegated tasks. Paul, an elementary principal, described how he delegated the process of dealing with student truancy. In the past, he had managed all aspects of this process personally—identifying students from attendance reports, sending letters to parents, filing truancy court paperwork, and attending truancy court. This took a great deal of time, including, over the course of the school year, a full work week just to attend half-day truancy court hearings. Over time, he delegated aspects of this process to office staff, including secretaries—who run reports and mail letters—and a new counselor, who he trained to attend truancy court in his stead:

> And so I handed that all off to my school counselor, and so she's the one that handles all
> of the court visits…. when I hired my counselor, for the first couple of truancy courts, I
> did go with her, so I would show her where she sat and what she had to do and who she

had to talk to. And so I did go with her a few times before I finally just let her go solo on it.

He reported that this approach now saves him a great deal of time, but it has also required that he protect the counselor's time from competing demands:

[W]hen teachers are asking her to do extra stuff for them, I've had to kind of put my foot down and say no, she's got enough on her plate, so if you want this done, you're going to have to do it, or find somebody else. …They would want her to call parents…if the teacher saw that the child was definitely struggling in class, rather than the teacher making the phone call, they were wanting her to call.

In order to ensure successful delegation, as this situation illustrates, principals must monitor and adjust the workload demands faced by employees to whom they are delegating. Some of these demands are seasonal rather than consistent throughout the year; for example, Chuck cited a situation during standardized testing in which the counselor's workload was being impacted by frequent changes teachers were making to testing groups. Each time teachers moved a student to a new group, this created a large amount of work for the counselor, so the principal intervened:

Well we already had all the test booklets by class, and then they started moving kids around, and she had to go back and create a whole new list, and move the test booklets into a different—and they changed that about four or five times. And finally I just went to them and said, no more. Stop. And I told them…every time you're moving one kid, you're creating her a whole bunch of work because she's having to create—we had to keep a roster sheet on who—you know, the kids who were in that group. And I said, every time you move one kid, she has to start that roster all over again.

Principals described taking proactive steps to monitor staff workloads as well. Lance described using KRAs, or Key Responsibility Areas, to identify overworked and under-utilized staff, and reassign tasks accordingly:

> So a couple years ago, I just basically divided and told everybody to write down—it's an idea I got from a colleague of mine—what are your key responsibility areas? You know, what are you—what do you do on a daily basis? And so I created things I need to have done in the office, and looked at their, we call them KRAs. Key responsibility areas. And then I basically eliminated what I felt like didn't need to happen. …one of the things that happened is our front office staff—we've got three, four ladies that work there—and three of them had a really extensive list of KRAs. I mean they were—this is what they were responsible for, the reports they had to do for downtown, et cetera et cetera. Whereas one, basically, theirs was—their actual responsibilities was—maybe it was real heavy at the front end of the year, but not real heavy during the year, you know like answering phones and dealing with kids.

By gaining a clear sense of the workloads of various office staff, and how these workloads varied throughout the school year, the principal was able to make adjustments to the division of labor to free up staff time to take on more of the principal's leadership work.

Limitations on Delegation Due to Staff Workload

When the existing workloads of office staff are too heavy, principals are constrained in their ability to delegate. Elementary principal Linda noted that office staff are busy just as she is, and she risks losing credibility if she offloads too much to office staff:

> I tend to have a hard time passing off things—I'm sure I do lots of things that I could easily give to someone else to do. But I always feel like we're short-staffed. Everybody

has more than they have time to do…so I don't ever want to be guilty of "Hey, why don't

you do this just because…I don't want to." [Laughs] You know? And so there's a line, I

think, in what you can delegate, and after a while, if all you're doing is pushing off some

of this stuff to other people, I think you lose some of your credibility with your staff, you

know? That we're all in this together. So it's just a balance.

High school principal Mark characterized delegation as essential, noting "you've got to share

some of that leadership," but noted that he is cautious about overwhelming his assistant

principal, who faced a considerable workload dealing with student discipline:

I've got an assistant principal. This is his 4th year with me. And so we're getting to a

point in that I'm passing on more and more to him. He does primarily the discipline, and

he has about 20 observations. So I give him 20 to 25 percent of our teacher observations

and evaluations. I try not to overwhelm him. But he needs to be part of that process. …I

have handed him more and more each year. You know, I mean little things—I got it this

morning. He has finished our duty roster for next nine weeks. I mean, for many years, I

did that. And as my responsibilities have increased, that's something that a year or two

[ago] I passed over to him, and he's getting done, and so without trying to overwhelm

him, because he's dealing with some of these same outside pressures that I do—I'm

trying to give him more duties.

These concerns represent Mark's desire to help his assistant principal grow by allowing him to

fulfil more and more duties of the principalship, but without such an overwhelming workload

that it would impede his effectiveness.

Leadership Work Principals Do Not Delegate

No discussion of delegation would be complete without an examination of what aspects of leadership principals decline to delegate to others, and under what circumstances. While respondents discussed delegating a wide variety of leadership tasks to others, some patterns in what they declined or were unable to delegate are evident. By law, principals are unable to delegate teacher evaluations to anyone other than assistant principals. Similarly, non-administrators are unable to make decisions about discipline matters such as out-of-school suspension. In other cases, such as meetings with parents about discipline issues, no legal or policy barrier to delegation was in place, but principals saw the importance of dealing with these matters personally—even allowing themselves to be interrupted when necessary. Why?

One possible explanation for principals' non-delegation comes from Mintzberg's (1973) *interpersonal* roles, which include *figurehead*, *leader*, and *liaison*. Of these three roles, the figurehead stands out as the role principals are least able to delegate to others. Others can be tasked with liaising with various parties, and charged with responsibility for leading various efforts, but serving as the figurehead of the organization may be among the roles principals are least able to delegate, given their role at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Principals may play a figurehead role in addition to any other contributions they make; for example, while an assistant principal may bear primary responsibility for student discipline, the principal may choose to become involved as a figurehead, to convey a sense of gravity and commitment to resolving a serious matter. On the other hand, a principal may choose not to become involved in a discipline situation, so that if a parent appeals the assistant principal's decision, the principal—rather than superintendent—can step in as the authority figure and make a final decision.

This sense of being unable to delegate was not reflected in issues that the principal must merely "sign off" on, such as state reports and testing assurances. As noted above, principals were comfortable delegating these issues to competent staff when possible, and were willing to put their own reputations on the line out of an abundance of trust in the staff to whom they had delegated. This reinforces the conclusion that it is the symbolic, rather than practical or fiduciary, responsibilities of the principalship that least able to be delegated to others.

Modifying the Division of Labor within the Principal Activity System

The *principal activity system* in a given school reflects the historical development of the organization over time (Kuutti, 1996), and as the work of the school and composition of the staff changes, this creates pressure to modify the activity system to carry out this work more efficiently. Sometimes this historical development results in puzzling divisions of labor—for example, Lance, a middle school principal, noted that some of these patterns came to his attention when hiring new staff to replace departing or re-assigned staff members:

When I replaced my registrar, it was kind of like well…like my finance lady does pictures. And we don't know—why do you do pictures? I don't know. It's just what we've always done. So we kind of got—we got it figured out why she does them now. But no one really knew why. And so we've eliminated some of those—those kind of things.

Respondents in this study cited a variety of ways in which they have modified the division of labor in response to changing circumstances. In some cases, respondents discussed changes to work that would not typically be considered leadership work, such as clerical tasks; however, since the school employees involved in these changes also handled work within the principal activity system, they fall within the scope of this study and merit discussion.

Respondents described changes to the division of labor among both teaching and non-teaching staff. For teaching staff, respondents focused primarily on changes to or clarifications of the department head, team leader, or PLC leader role, which are discussed at length in the following chapter. Julie, an elementary principal, noted the importance of clearly defining the role of teacher team leaders, and made the decision to split the team leader role into two—creating a logistics leadership role and a curriculum leadership role for each team. Lance, a middle school principal, described how he found so much success with clarifying key responsibility areas (KRAs) among office staff that he repeated the process with the rest of the staff. He found that this process revealed a number of responsibilities that lacked a current rationale, allowing him to identify tasks that no longer needed to be completed, or that could be simplified by involving fewer people:

> And so we had everybody do the same thing—basically, [list] your key responsibilities as a department chair, as a curriculum director, as a counselor, and—you know, like our two counselors have two different responsibilities, sets of responsibilities, whereas one handles gifted and talented, and one handles special ed. And so having that on paper, have each of them kind of reflect on what they did on a daily basis, and then our next process was to, ok, what are some things that we can eliminate? What are some things that we—we're not sure why we do them any more, but we've just always done them. And so we went through that process, and that was a yearlong process.

In some cases, this meant that the principal re-assumed responsibility for some tasks that had been delegated to other staff such as the registrar, who frequently had to ask him for information or clarification about how to complete various accreditation reports. He explained that this

actually created less work for him: "It's easier for me to do it. Saves both of us a whole ton of time."

Respondents also mentioned a large number of office-related tasks when discussing adjustments to the division of labor in their schools. In some cases, the first order of business was not to introduce changes, but merely to establish clarity about existing responsibilities. High school principal Richard, for example, cited a situation in which it had become unclear who was responsible for monitoring a certain account containing career tech funds:

[I]n the past, the district has monitored that account, from the tracking of the RQs [requisitions] and the POs [purchase orders], who's on a career tech teacher and who's not a career tech, because there are funds associated with it, but there was someone who communicated that that should also be done on the building level, so the building has knowledge of RQs and POs, so on and so forth, as it relates to career tech. So, I ended up having a conversation with both parties to kind of find out backstory on how we've accomplished this task in the past, and basically it's just trying to get all of the facts.

Linda noted that sometimes, clarifying roles and responsibilities is necessary because teachers arrive in the school with unrealistic expectations from their previous schools:

[E]lementary teachers, when they come to a school they haven't worked at before, they think it should run like whatever school they came from. And so it's very hard for them to wrap their brain around that we don't have the manpower here. You know, if you were in a big city school, you may have four reading specialists. You may have four special ed teachers. Well here we don't, and so there's no way we can do all of the things that maybe someone at another school can fit into their day.

She explained that these inaccurate expectations sometimes led to perceptions of laziness and complaints about other staff not doing what teachers thought they should be doing. To deal with these misunderstandings, she asked specialists to clarify their responsibilities:

> I had each of my specialty teachers type out kind of an overview of what their role is in the school. And that kind of helped to in that, you know, for instance, a counselor in a different school, maybe their job is to do individual counseling all day. That's not what we do here. So to let the staff see that, these are some of the things that this person is responsible for, and this is how her schedule is laid out, and this is the procedure that we follow if we need more of her time—that is helpful too. Because I feel like sometimes it's a big secret, and then that just spurs on the conversations of "Well, she's not working as hard as so-and-so, and I wish she would do blah blah blah." You know. A couple of years ago, we had a change in counselors, and teachers were very concerned that she wasn't doing guidance counseling. So I said let's tweak the schedule. If it's not working, then we need to look at it and tweak it. If I get the same kinds of complaints from more than one person, then I will just say, hey, heads up, people are really noticing that you are…blah blah blah. Just so that they're a little more aware. Then if it's a real problem, I'll deal with it directly. But I think sometimes it's just that people think they know.

After establishing clarity, respondents exhibited a concern for balancing workloads across staff. Armed with the relevant facts about what each office staff member was responsible for, Lance, the middle school principal who asked staff to prepare lists of their Key Results Areas (KRAs), made a spreadsheet to balance out responsibilities over the course of the school year among four office staffers. While three had long lists of duties throughout the year, the

fourth office staff member had a list of tasks that were concentrated at the beginning and end of the year:

> [Y]ou could see the columns—now under her columns, you could see that most of her duties were really heavy in the first of the year and the last of the year, because she did, she handled all of the inventories, she handled all of the forms kids had, she handled putting all of that stuff together. Well after the first four weeks of school, that's over, until the last four weeks of school.

This allowed him to re-assign certain duties to balance out their workloads:

> [T]hree of them had a really extensive list of KRAs…Whereas one…their actual responsibilities was—maybe it was real heavy at the front end of the year, but not real heavy during the year, you know like answering phones and dealing with kids. And so we—some of the things that we had used the other ladies for, we began using her for. You know, whereas she's now our go-to in the front office if we need a kid. Whereas in the past, we would go to the other lady who had more responsibilities. …some areas that we felt like we needed done, parental contact, so we kind of added to her duties, and then took some duties off of the other ladies for her to take care of, to kind of balance it out.

As he notes, having a clear inventory of what each staff member is currently responsible for makes it easier to assign new tasks—such as contacting parents about attendance—to the appropriate person.

Moving Non-Teaching Staff to Different Positions

Principals reported moving office staff to new positions for a variety of reasons. Chuck, a middle school principal, discovered when he arrived in the school that the registrar wielded too much power, and needed to be moved to another position:

> [It] was just one of those situations where you've got a support staff person that has been allowed to have control over a lot of things that they really shouldn't have control over. And things that need to happen for kids don't happen because that person says no, even though they shouldn't even have the power to say no.

He noted that this registrar was highly skilled at dealing with the technical aspects of her job, but was frequently rude to parents and students, and was not suited to a front-office role. Seeing that the high school was seeking to replace a registrar who was struggling with these technical aspects of the job, he proposed moving the middle school registrar to the high school:

> And so I was able to pitch to the high school principal, and the superintendent, that we were not taking advantage of her strengths. In fact we were allowing her weaknesses to override her strengths, and if we moved her to the high school, we would—we could take advantage of her strengths, and not lose what she could offer the school district, but get away from the problems that she was causing the middle school. And yeah, part of that is my used car salesman in me, but it came true, and she has done some great things for the high school, without going over there and, you know, being a not-so-nice face that parents and students are seeing in the front office.

As he notes, because the high school position did not involve greeting students and parents, these weaknesses were much less relevant to her overall performance than at the middle school. Chuck was able to hire a retired teacher to serve as the new middle school registrar. In other cases, too, principals reported hiring retired district employees to serve as office staff. Mike, for example, hired as a secretary an employee who had previously served as custodian in the school for 17 years, and he noted that the current high school secretary in his district previously served as a classroom teacher for more than 30 years.

The challenges of serving as a "front office" employee were apparent in the situations relayed by a number of respondents. Karen described moving her middle school's finance secretary out of the main office, away from other office staff:

> Two of them are together, and three of them have separate work areas, which has—which actually has helped. When they were all in one area, they tended to step on each other. And so, now that they've kind of—we're more spread out—it has really helped significantly. I think sometimes you can have too many people in one place. [The finance secretary is] a strong personality, and sometimes feelings got hurt, but she's very good at keeping us out of trouble with the accountant downtown. Making sure we follow all the rules. And so I had to weigh that out.

In addition to physical moving office staff to different locations around campus, principals reported assigning office staff to non-traditional roles. In response to budget cuts, Karen opted to assign this secretary to also cover in-school suspension, which necessitated the move out of the main office. While this arrangement is not without its difficulties, she noted that it made it easier for her to keep the books without being interrupted:

> [S]he couldn't really handle finance and be the receptionist. So we just kinda—I just told her, well, when you have to count money, we'll get you a cover, and you can run purchase orders from upstairs. So that's what we did. Again, do we have challenges that creep up every now and again? Yes. Things I have to deal with that I probably wouldn't have to deal with if she were down here? But we're making the best of it.

Making the best of budget cuts and unconventional combinations of duties, she noted, requires flexibility:

It's worked out. She's figured it out. She didn't want to, but she's made it work, and I make sure that I tell her how much I appreciate her, and how important her job is, and I know this isn't ideal…just so she knows that I know she doesn't like it. I get that, but I do try and, you know, give her the affirmation. Probably a little more than others, because she is doing something she really doesn't want to do, but she's doing it because she's a team player.

Being a team player, she noted, is important because "an efficient office is one where everyone works together, and sometimes you step out of that job description, and help out when needed." Similar, middle school principal Steven noted that, while he would have preferred to hire a certificated teacher run the school's in-school suspension program, it is currently run by a member of the support staff who also completes other administrative work while students are in her room.

Protecting the Counselor Role and Using Counselors Effectively

Finally, principals characterized the work of counselors as extremely important, and cited their efforts to protect this work. Steven described the work of counselors as leadership work closely related to his own:

We have two counselors. They obviously deal with not necessarily discipline issues, but you know, emotional issues, family issues, those type of things. And so, yeah, our teachers—they do a pretty good job of seeking their—the counselors' expertise on student issues outside of discipline. And you know, I'm aware of some of those issues, of you know, a student, their parents are going through a divorce, something like that. A lot of times I'll know about it, but at the same time, there's some times that I don't, and the counselors kind of step in a leadership role dealing with those type of things.

He noted that in order for counselors to be effective in their role, he and the assistant principal—not the counselors—must take on the role of disciplinarian:

> [S]ometimes I have conversations with the counselors of where they need to step in, where they don't… I had one counselor, this year was her first year. She did a good job, but I had to have some conversations with her about not stepping into the disciplinarian role. I told you that they deal quite a bit with student issues and things like that, but—and sometimes it's, you know, two girls are fighting or whatever or something like that—I had the counselor, she was kind of wanting to step into the disciplinarian role of hey, I want to give you guys in-school suspension, or you know that kind of thing. And I had to have some conversations with her about hey, you are the student—you're their advocate, you're not their, you know—you're the good cop. You let me be the bad cop.

Similarly, elementary principal Paul cited a desire to protect his school's counselor from being burdened with additional requests from teachers:

> But since I've hired her, she's been with me three years now, I definitely saw some leadership capabilities. But I also try to protect her when other—when teachers are asking her to do extra stuff for them, I've had to kind of put my foot down and say no, she's got enough on her plate, so if you want this done, you're going to have to do it, or find somebody else. They would want her to call parents to check on if the child had, you know, if the teacher saw that the child was definitely struggling in class, rather than the teacher making the phone call, they were wanting her to call. And so that's one of the things that I had to say no, that's your responsibility as a teacher. We don't mind making those phone calls, but first of all, it should come from the teacher.

He noted that a similar situation has occurred with an interventionist, whom teachers would ask to make copies:

> And so I've also had to clarify that no, my—the interventionists are actually
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> paraprofessionals. And so I had to clarify that our paras are here to work with kids, and
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> they're not to be paper copiers. You know, if they run short of one copy because they add
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> a new kid to the class or something like that, that's a little more understandable. But
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> that's not their job duty every week, to make sure that all their copies are ready. That's
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> the teacher's responsibility.

While staffing patterns varied widely from school to school, the distributed nature of the work of leadership was clear in each instance. Even when they are the sole administrators in their schools, principals rely heavily on others as they carry out the work of leadership, and these patterns are mediated, as suggested by Activity Theory, by tools, rules (norms), and the division of labor. In the next chapter, I will explore the unique role played by teacher leaders in PLCs, departments, and school leadership teams, and the ways principals are redefining these roles in order to accomplish key school-wide goals.

Chapter 7: Changing the Role of Teacher Leaders

While I have addressed all four of this study's research questions in the preceding three chapters, one additional dimension of the work of leadership emerged from the data and merits special attention. Numerous respondents cited the importance of team leaders in accomplishing the work of leadership, and noted specific ways in which they were changing the role of leaders such as department heads, team leaders, PLC leaders, and school leadership team representatives.

Expanding the Role of Department Heads

Department heads at the secondary level were cited by respondents as a key source of leadership that had previously been underutilized. Linda, an elementary principal, noted that she was at one point "the chair of every committee" and made the decision to assign other staff members to lead each committee, such as the safety committee, the discipline committee, and the reading committee. This arrangement reflected a typical pattern of delegation—handing off work the principal is currently doing to other staff. However, respondents acted in other ways to cultivate teacher leadership beyond handing off their own current work, instead defining all-new work for teacher leaders. High school principal Mark noted that he had been working to expand the role of department heads, who had previously been doing very little:

> For years we had department heads here, and in all honesty, it was, while they would have meetings, it was 90% just a title. They didn't have very much responsibility and true—power's not the word, but true authority. And a few years ago, we changed the concept of the team leader, and how we wanted to do things, and we are still in the process of defining what they do, but they certainly carry more responsibility now than they did in the past. And more authority in things that they're doing. Now they are there to work with their team, or their department, but they are trying to do more peer

monitoring than we have done in the past. Not an evaluation sort, but in trying to get

feedback.

He cited the importance of conversations and relationships with key staff in envisioning and

carrying out changes at the right pace. Relating a leadership team meeting in which he presented

a plan for moving forward with a change, he noted the value of teacher leaders' reactions:

[W]e spend a lot of time kind of developing what our vision was here at the school and

how it ties to our strategic plan, and spend a lot of time with them as we are re-doing the

way that we benchmark, and I'm spending time with my team leaders to help me develop

this, and also to help me sell it as we go forward. And you know, they really saved me a

headache just about three weeks ago, in that I had figured this thing out, and thought I

knew where I wanted to go, and met with them, and seeing the looks on their faces, they

were—while they will follow me and will lead in that way, when they're looking

overwhelmed to me, that worried me about how the rest of my staff was going to feel.

As a result of their apparent hesitation, he scaled back his immediate plans for the change, and

instead initiated 1:1 conversations with team leaders to get a better sense of how to proceed:

And so I went and talked to all of my team leaders individually to, let's give them a

chance to share their concerns and let them know exactly what I was thinking, and I think

by the time we were done talking, they all felt better about that.

As a result of these conversations, he was able to identify which parts of the change to move

forward with immediately, and which parts to scale back. He then continued to have individual

conversations—with all teachers—to continue to build support for the change and gain a sense of

teachers' readiness and progress:

And so that next morning, I presented part of it, and the rest of it, truthfully, I'd been kind of presenting on a one-on-one basis as I'm doing post-conferences. I'm adding that as part of the post-conference. And the things that we have added have been met with— without dread, I guess. And again, they're not big things. I mean, they're things like, trying to get better at an exit ticket, and making sure we're being deliberate about our objectives, and things that shouldn't be very far out of the ordinary. But anything that's new sounds like a big deal, and so you know, some of them were just worried about where this was going. And so again, from listening to their input, it really didn't slow down what we're doing. It just caused me to say you know what, they're may be a better way of going about that. I need to re-look at this. And so I think it's made this shift that we're making more successful. And I'm seeing changes as I'm going in classrooms already.

Earlier conversations with teacher leaders thus paved the way for more successful implementation of the change school-wide, and individual conversations with all teachers, as part of the normal supervision and evaluation process, helped Mark monitor the change effort and ensure that its pace was appropriate, given teachers' readiness and needs.

The importance of this team leader role became even clearer during my site visit, when Mark met with a department head to discuss a major curriculum and assessment initiative, "Benchmark Data Plans." During a 30-minute meeting I observed, Mark and the language arts department head discussed the shortcomings of their current curriculum, the standards addressed in each grade level, and challenges around alignment between grades and different sections of English within a grade level. It was clear that Mark placed a great deal of trust in the department head's judgment and ability to lead her team. They discussed in depth the differences in

assessment between math—with which Mark was much more familiar—and English, which did not lend itself to assessments that were similar in design from one trimester to the next or one grade level to the next. This discussion was an open one in the sense that Mark was not merely delegating a leadership task—development of the Benchmark Data Plan—to the department head, but was actively collaborating with her in making decisions about what this project would entail. It was clear that this instructional leadership responsibility was "stretched over" (Portin et al., 2009) both the principal and department head.

Teachers as PLC Leaders

In addition to department heads, several respondents addressed the issue of PLC (Professional Learning Community) leadership specifically, citing the importance of having teachers lead this work in their teams. Unlike delegated leadership work such as chairing a committee, which might be handed off to teachers or other staff after being done for a time by the principal, respondents characterized PLC leadership as a role that must be fulfilled by teachers from its inception. Karen, a middle school principal, said her department heads

> run the PLC meetings. They keep me informed of their progress. I meet with them
> quarterly—that's once each nine weeks—and get updates on their PLCs. They don't need
> me to come micromanage their PLCs. I just need to hear from them what they need from
> me. And so, I have found that that helps me, and it helps them be more productive. They
> report to me for accountability; I get information that helps me; and they're moving
> forward in their departments. So, I just try to empower my teachers.

She noted that PLC leaders in her school were growing into their roles:

> I've seen a lot of growth in teachers taking on that leadership role. They can speak to
> their data, what they're doing, how they've helped kids, what interventions they've put in

place, have those interventions worked, what else they need to try. And they run the data

review meetings that we have. And so it's good to see teachers be able to talk about their

kids, talk about their growth, and understand the data that they're using. And we've come

a long way with that.

She noted that while some PLC leaders are relatively new to the school, it's important that they

have the respect of their colleagues:

[T]here's a professional respect that these people have in leading their PLC. They come

with great knowledge of their subject; they are very respected educators; the kids enjoy

their classes; they're doing innovative—using innovative strategies in their classroom. So

I think there's a lot that goes into it; certainly, if you're not respected by your peers,

they're not going to listen to you.

While PLC leadership work overlaps with the instructional leadership work principals

themselves do, and is supervised and supported by principals—and thus intersects the "activity

system" of the principal's work—respondents were clear in characterizing PLC leadership as

teachers' work. Chuck noted that when he arrived at his middle school, he recognized the need to

dramatically increase the importance of the department head role in order to implement

professional learning communities successfully:

I do have department heads, and I told them when I first got here—because at that time,

they were really doing little to nothing as department heads. And I warned them, you

know, I'm really going to start leaning on you, because I've got to be able to delegate

some of this leadership—especially as we start pushing through PLCs, I can't be there to

lead every conversation and every meeting. And so I've got to be able to coach you guys

up so that you completely understand this process, the benefits of, the whys, and every

detail about it, so that I can say, English language arts, go to your PLC meetings, and my

language arts department head can lead them through it…you're going to have to

delegate, and you're going to have to develop leaders and depend on some of those

leaders, whether it's coaches or department heads, to be able to lead some of those things.

He described this process at length, noting that the struggle to implement PLCs was a productive

one that he purposefully allowed each department to work through without his direct

intervention, telling them "These are your PLCs, not mine." He viewed this struggle, led by

department heads, as "problem-based learning for adults," and saw it as a multi-year process. In

the first year, he noted, he did not even raise the topic of PLCs directly, instead identifying other

issues that needed to be addressed, which he knew PLCs would be an ideal solution for. In this

way, he was able to build support for PLCs over time, through team leaders, while also building

the capacity of teams to function as PLCs. He noted that this sense of ownership was critical to

the success of the PLC initiative:

> They're intended to be the teachers' PLCs, for the benefit of them, to help their kids, and
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> I didn't want to come in, even in the early stages, and facilitate, because I just felt like, if
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> I start from the very beginning, they're going to rely on me to make it happen. I want
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> them to benefit from the struggle of figuring out what to do and how is this going to
>
> actually benefit us, instead of it being me telling them how to do it.

He noted that when teachers encountered challenges in implementing PLCs, he responded by

providing training, but he "never jumped in there and took over." This resulted in the kind of

learning he was hoping for:

> And I had a lot of teachers that said, "We were really mad at you, because we didn't
>
> really understand the purpose, and you were kind of letting us flounder, but now I

understand the power of letting us struggle through, and then beginning to help us connect the dots."

He noted that allowing teachers to struggle in this way is an essential aspect of empowering them as learners, just as teaching students how to find answers for themselves, rather than merely giving them answers, is essential for student learning.

Clarifying Teacher Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

Other efforts to redefine the role of teacher leaders focused more on establishing clarity about existing expectations rather than modifying expectations. Julie, an elementary principal, noted the importance of clearly defining team leaders' roles and responsibilities:

We had team leaders, and then, they weren't always sure of who's in charge of to do what. And then, is it a team leader job, or is it a principal job, or is it a staff member's job. And so, I think that that has been a—people get upset about it because they're tired, they want to go home, they're like "I'm not supposed to copy the behavior charts. We're all supposed to copy them." That kind of thing. And so, we sat down and we just had a talk about it, and said we're all here together and we all have to share this. And I actually wrote out, I came up with two team leader positions instead, so now I have a logistics team leader and a curriculum team leader. Because I was having them, you know, write SMART goals, and run the PLC meetings, and have norms, and turn in minutes, and all that. So now we have two, and they are much happier now. And I also wrote a job description for each, so now it's real clear what I expect and what I want from each of them.

She noted that now that these roles are clearly defined, "they know to whom they should go to with questions or concerns or problems. Before they weren't sure, so that was wasting time."

The School Leadership Team

Another key teacher leadership role is serving on the school leadership team. Karen noted that she handpicks her leadership team "because I need a variety of voices." She thus includes some new teachers, some experienced teachers, elective teachers, and others in order to "try and hit all the areas of the building that need to have a voice." Linda, an elementary principal, noted that the teachers who serve on her school's leadership team also chair other committees, so she can coordinate with the various committees without having to lead them all personally. She described her approach to choosing committee leaders:

Well, I usually select them, or it's someone that has expressed interest in it. It definitely has to be someone that the rest of their team can, you know, will work with, because sometimes that's not the case. So really it comes down to I say that I select them. I'm pretty open to suggestion, and if there's a person that, you know, there's someone working on their master's, or there's someone that would just like to have some of those leadership experiences, that's fine. But…so I select them, and then I try to match them up with a committee that they would feel that it was most strongly to be helpful in. You know, if I have a teacher who is really interested in our school being safe, and you know, cares a lot about student health, then that's the committee I'm going to give them. You know, my reading specialist is one that's on the leadership team; she chairs the RSA committee, you know. My counselor chairs a committee that has to do with anti-bullying and school themes. I mean, you know, we try to give people the opportunity to serve where they're best suited.

In several schools, respondents noted that the leadership team was composed at least partially of PLC leaders. Other respondents identified additional criteria for determining which teachers would serve on the school leadership team. Karen noted that it would not be appropriate to assign new teachers to serve on the school leadership team, given the substantial learning curve of adjusting to working in a new school and learning its curriculum. She noted that some teachers on the leadership team were those with the longest tenure among their colleagues, but this itself was not the deciding factor; as noted above, she cited respect from peers as essential.

Delegating Decision Authority to Teachers

Lance, a middle school principal, described what kinds of decisions his schoo's leadership team makes, and how his role as principal intersects with this team's work:

They're involved in mostly whole-school decisions that affect student instruction…. I feel like they—you know, sometimes we're told downtown "this is the way it's going to be." Those kinds of decisions we don't get to make. But you know, they're pretty good about, you know, how are we going to handle instruction, how are we going to intervene with kids, what are we going to do when they're not passing their work, what are we going to do if they are and they need enrichment? And so they kind of come up with those kind of things. And I feel like my job is to schedule them and to make it work. So they're really involved in a lot of—anything dealing with most—they put together curriculum maps, they put together, you know, basically, instruction is handled by the teachers, and how they're going to deliver that, and how they're going to check that and monitor it. And kind of my job is to make sure that they're monitoring it and doing what they said they're going to do.

While this description of this division of labor situates the principal as markedly less hands-on about matters of curriculum and instruction than other respondents—especially elementary principals—it reflects a desire to allow decisions to be made by those most familiar with the relevant facts and most affected by the decisions that are made.

Similarly, Mike, another middle school principal, explained why he delegated decisions about student placement in advanced math classes to a particular math teacher. This represented a change in the principal's previous practice, which was to set minimum standards for advanced 8th grade math classes based on state tests and course grades in 7th grade math. He expressed some hesitation to allow students with test scores and grades just below the cutoff points, out of a concern that they would not succeed in advanced courses, but ultimately allowed the teacher to make these decisions, noting

> she's in charge of that now. And I will back her up, if there's any issues, but I'm going to let her, since she deals with those students on a daily basis, and if she feels that there are students that would benefit from that that maybe didn't score as high, or their grade wasn't as high for whatever reason, that they would benefit from taking that algebra, that they could do the work, then it might be a challenge for them and they might rise to it.

Because the principal does not work with all students on a daily basis, he has less information about their potential to succeed in advanced mathematics courses, and thus feels more confident in the teacher's ability to make placement decisions in order to appropriately challenge each student.

However, some decisions are better made by a disinterested third party. Linda, an elementary principal, made the decision to put the counselor in charge of special education referrals:

[W]hen I first came to this district, people would go to the special ed teacher and they'd say, "Oh my gosh, we've got to test this kid. OK, let's do it." Well that gave the special education teacher a, a lot of work to do, but b, a lot of power. So what I found would happen is, depending on whether the special ed teacher really wanted to serve that kid, really made an impact on how quickly or slowly that process went. And then sometimes I would find myself sitting in a meeting, and I'm like, what the heck. We've got ten kids that need help far more than this one. How are we at this point? And so initially, I did that to take the power away—that it needed to be a neutral party. You know, I'm sure the classroom teacher desperately wants help. The special ed teacher wants to pick and choose. We needed to neutralize the field, and so that's why we went that direction, and it's been very, very helpful.

As she notes, if a teacher is too directly affected by a decision—for example, if a special education referral will reduce the classroom teacher's workload, or increase the special education teacher's workload—that decision may be better made by a neutral third party. Because the counselor's case load is not affected by the outcome of the referral, she is a more appropriate person to manage the special education referral process. Linda noted that reassigning this responsibility to the counselor has not only reduced the special education teacher's workload dramatically, but has also made the process more transparent to teachers.

While the examples of teacher leadership cited in this chapter cover a wide range of responsibilities—not all of which fall within the scope of the principal activity system—understanding how principals work with and through teacher leaders is an essential to our understanding of the distributed nature of instructional leadership. Understanding the dynamics of processes as complex as school change demands powerful conceptual tools—such as Activity

Theory—as well as a thoughtful focus on the various "grain sizes" or units of analysis that are suited to the task. While the principal activity system remains the unit of analysis in this study, understanding the broader exercise of leadership in the school puts the principal's work into its proper context.

In the next and final chapter, I will discuss this study's contributions to the professional and scholarly knowledge base on school leadership, as well as directions for future research.

Chapter 8: Future Directions in Research on the Work of School Leadership

It is my hope that this study, and the publication of this dissertation, will make several valuable contributions to the school leadership profession, and to the body of scholarship addressing the work of school leaders, as well as productivity and organizational effectiveness more broadly.

Contributions to Professional Practice

With regard to professional practice among school leaders, this study may prove useful in understanding and improving the way the work of leadership is carried out in schools. I have attempted to document, conceptualize, and contextualize the ways principals strive to accomplish more in the available time. By drawing attention to the mediating role played by rules, tools, and the division of labor, it is my ultimate aim to help principals become more productive, and to help principal preparation and in-service professional development programs more adequately prepare school leaders for the challenges of the job as it continues to evolve. In particular, I believe that two overwrought concepts, delegation and collaboration, can be relieved of the burdens of misuse that have been placed upon them.

First, *delegation* has long been offered as a reductive solution for any overworked principal. As respondents noted, principals are often not taught to delegate effectively, and the admonition to delegate often comes without a clear sense of the impact that delegation will have on other staff, or on the quality of the resulting work. As I have shown, a principal's ability to delegate work with confidence depends to a large extent on the availability of staff who can competently complete that work on the principal's behalf. Principals must also invest time in training staff to complete delegated tasks effectively, and even once a task has been delegated, the principal's oversight responsibility remains. However, I have also shown that effective

delegation is possible when principals invest time in training and oversight, and take responsibility for monitoring the workloads of the staff to whom they are delegating. Attention to the mediating *rules*, *tools*, and *division of labor* should also make delegation more effective, and by applying these Activity Theory concepts to the work of school leaders, I hope to help principals delegate more effectively.

Second, *collaboration* has long been used in the education profession as a catch-all term for work involving multiple staff. It is my hope that drawing renewed attention to Wenger's (1998) important work on *communities of practice* will result in increased clarity in discussions of joint work. Layering on Activity Theory as an organizing framework can, I believe, clarify some aspects of the functioning of communities of practice, such as *joint enterprise*, that are somewhat ambiguous in Wenger's work. By making the division of labor more explicit, leaders can gain a better understanding of how work is being accomplished in their schools, and can make more judicious improvement decisions.

Contributions to the Literature

Positive vs. Normative Inquiry into Leadership Work

As I have argued, following Mintzberg (1973), the most appropriate definition of leadership work is the positivistic tautology "whatever work leaders do," rather than a normative definition such as "redesigning the organization" (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leading scholars of principal leadership, including Grissom and Loeb (2011), have produced quantitative findings that challenge the dominant view that "instructional leadership" is the "real" work of principals. By adding the qualitative findings of the present study to the literature on the principalship, I hope to further the profession's efforts to support principals in working effectively on behalf of student learning. With Grissom and Loeb (2011), I posit that future inquiry into principals'

instructional leadership work must encompass the organizational management work that principals actually do:

> effective instructional leadership combines an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, provide them with the opportunities they need to improve, and keep the school running smoothly. (p. 29).

A positive—rather than normative—view of the work of school leaders is essential for crafting policies that will have the intended impact on student learning. Equipped with a more nuanced understanding of how the work of the principalship is actually distributed, policymakers can better weigh the costs and benefits of administrative burdens such as data reporting requirements. In the state of Oklahoma in particular, it is clear from this study that a great deal of principal time is spent compiling data for redundant reports. Often, this data is already in the state's possession. Understanding that, for example, principals may or may not compile or even review these reports personally, depending on the availability of other staff with the necessary expertise, can help policymakers achieve their aims in more targeted ways. For example, if their intention is to ensure the accuracy of data already in the state's possession, reports could be provided to each school for the principal's review and signature. If the intention is instead to ensure that schools collect and submit data that is not already in the state's possession, a single report could be mandated in order to collect this information, and redundant reports demanding the same information could be eliminated. While I offer this as an illustration rather than a specific policy recommendation for Oklahoma legislators, it illustrates the degree of precision that can be achieved when legislation is informed by the real-world distribution of work in schools, rather than a preconceived expectation of what principals do. If, for example, secretaries and counselors

routinely complete these reports on behalf of principals, legislators may be less inclined to mandate principal involvement (or, depending on their aims, *more* inclined to mandate principal involvement). More precise alignment between the goals and the requirements of policies affecting school leaders can help policymakers achieve their goals, while occupying less of educators' time and effort.

Activity Systems as Units of Analysis

Another scholarly contribution of this study is the consideration of the *principal activity system* as the most appropriate unit of analysis for bounding inquiry into the work of principals. While previous studies have noted the degree to which leadership is "stretched over" other staff (Portin et al., 2009), the specific pattern of mediated relationships described by Activity Theory allows for more precise explorations of the work of leadership. As noted briefly in Chapter 2, a school is not a single activity system, nor does the work of leadership reside in a single activity system; rather, a school is a set of activity systems, one of which I have defined as the principal activity system. This system is the focus of the present study, and is bounded by principal involvement. Other forms of leadership may operate within activity systems that do not feature principal involvement; for example, if responsibility for athletic activities is fully delegated to an assistant principal or athletic director, athletics may rightly be considered outside of the principal activity system.

A rich topic for future research is the nature of relationships between activity systems with a school. For example, the activity system involving an athletic director's work surely intersects in meaningful ways with the principal activity system, even if the principal does not regularly "work on" athletics-related tasks. Mapping these relationships between activity systems

and exploring their implications for policy and practice could shed important light on how schools function, and could facilitate school improvement in new and unforeseen ways.

Moreover, a detailed understanding of activity systems within a school could help explain surprising failures of school reform. For example, the underwhelming results from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's efforts to break large comprehensive high schools into smaller "academies" (Marshak, 2010) could perhaps be better understood by examining their impact on activity systems. In some cases, even seemingly dramatic reforms may make few fundamental changes to the distribution of work within a school or set of schools-within-a-school; however, the added complexities of the reform may place strain on activity systems at key points. For example, a large high school that is divided into four academies might serve the same total number of students with the same number of staff both before and after the reform; however, changes to the division of labor—for example, requiring each administrator to act as an autonomous principal rather than as part of an administrative team—could have dramatic impacts on organizational effectiveness and student outcomes.

Activity systems are also potentially useful for understanding the historical development of organizational practices, because, as Kuutti notes, the "historical development of the relationship between subject and object" is stored or "crystallized" into activity systems (1996, p. 27). This crystallization, as Wenger suggests, can become a hindrance "when the stiffness of its form renders reification obsolete" (p. 64)—that is, when old solutions are a poor match for current problems. Failing to understand this historical development—why things are done the way they're done—can lead to stymied and wasted efforts to introduce change. As Gates (2009) notes in his first Annual Letter regarding the Foundation's school reform efforts, "We had less success trying to change an existing school than helping to create a new school." This is

understandable, given the way activity systems develop over time, crystallizing the "successful adaptations of an earlier time" (Cole, 1999, p. 90) into organizational practices that may outlive their usefulness. It is my hope that Activity Theory, and the present study of the work of school principals, will assist future school reformers in developing a deeper understanding of the organizations they are seeking to reform.

The Distributed Nature of Instructional Leadership

Previous studies have noted the many ways in which school leadership is shared, distributed, stretched over, or delegated to various staff. However, the application of Activity Theory to this distributed work within schools opens new possibilities for research. I believe the concept of *mediation* has enormous potential for further inquiry, and the mediating relationships specified by Activity Theory provide clear directions for such research.

First, the role that *tools* play in mediating the relation between subject and object is of great importance, and merits further research, particularly with regard to productivity. Transforming an object into an outcome—that is, completing work—should be done in as efficient a manner as possible, and while productivity has received ample popular attention, scholarly attention is in short supply. Future research might focus on the adoption of specific tools with a view toward productivity gains; for example, how do principals use teacher evaluation software to complete required evaluations with increasing efficiency? Second, the role that *rules*, or interpersonal norms, play in mediating the relationship between the principal and other staff, should not be overlooked in studies of the work of school leaders. These norms include role-based expectations—what March & Heath (1994) term the *logic of appropriateness*, which deviates in significant ways from the more idealized rationality of the *logic of consequences*. Third, the role that the division of labor plays in mediating the relationship

between staff and tasks (or in Activity Theory terms, between the *community* and the *object*) could prove especially rich for scholars seeking to understand how schools with various staffing patterns accomplish their work on behalf of students.

Directions for Further Inquiry and Application

This study suggests several promising directions for further scholarly inquiry into the work practices of school leaders. Brief discussions of suggested research questions follow. Two broad areas of inquiry are offered as possibilities—further inquiry into activity systems and decision-making within schools, and quantitative inquiry into principal productivity.

How Do Principal Activity Systems Initiate and Terminate Work?

While principals in the present study cited examples of work they had initiated or terminated, it was beyond the scope of this study to explore in detail the process by which these decisions were made and implemented. Understanding how principals accept or start new work, and understanding how they decide to stop doing work they have previously done, is an important topic that has received little attention. Given the ever-growing demands placed on school leaders, this topic is rich with potential insights for policy and practice.

How Do Boundary-Spanning Roles Link the Work of Multiple Activity Systems within a School?

Another area of potential inquiry into the work of activity systems within schools is the boundary-spanning role (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) played by individuals such as administrators, specialists, team leaders and office staff. Given that schools are composed of multiple intersecting activity systems, understanding the unique role played by boundary-spanning staff could help identify key levers for successful change.

How Do Principals Decide What Work to Take On?

This study did not directly address the question of how principals decide what work to take on, what to decline, and what to delegate to others. This decision-making question was among the leading contenders for inclusion in this study, but ultimately fell outside the scope of my research focus. Learning how principals decide on their work, and determine what work others should do, and how this work should be distributed, is itself a topic worthy of substantive inquiry. In particular, exploring the tension between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness (March & Heath, 1994) may prove illuminating.

What Productivity Strategies Do Principals Use, and How Effective Are They?

With its qualitative multiple case study design, this study did not attempt to collect quantitative data on the prevalence of specific productivity strategies among school principals. By building on the categories of strategies outlined in this study, future studies may be able to ascertain the degree to which these studies are in use across the profession, using surveys or other methods that lend themselves to large-scale data collection. Combined with innovative statistical models linking principal practice to school performance, such as that used by Grissom and Loeb (2011), a quantitative study of these practices could also start to establish linkages between the use of particular strategies or patterns of work distribution, and student learning outcomes.

How Can Aspiring and Practicing Principals Best be Trained to Maximize Their Productivity?

An immediate aim of this study was to generate knowledge to impact the quality of professional development for school leaders, especially in the area of workload management and productivity. Future studies could further contribute to this knowledge by assessing the

effectiveness of various training and professional development approaches. In previous studies, such as Turnbull et al. (2009), such impact has been measured primarily in terms of time use, e.g. whether a particular approach results in the allocation of more time to particular categories of work, such as narrowly defined "instructional leadership." With a more inclusive (and less arbitrarily narrow) definition of school leaders' work, as informed by this study, future studies could examine the relationship between training approaches and other outcomes, such as principal stress, work hours, and even student learning outcomes.

How Do Activity Systems Adapt when Staff Turnover Occurs?

Another area of promising inquiry might focus on how activity systems adapt when staff turnover occurs. No school keeps exactly the same staff forever, yet it is often difficult to assess what functional changes are occurring when staff are replaced. Activity Theory provides useful conceptual tools for guiding inquiry into these questions. In the case of principal turnover, a salient issue is leadership succession; scholars may wish to develop a deeper understanding of what changes—and what does not change—when a principal is replaced. The findings of such studies could lead to greater stability at the school level, even as individuals come and go. Alternately, in cases where dramatic change rather than stability is desired, it may help to understand the same dynamics from the perspective of resistance to change. If, for example, replacing the principal does not alter the fundamental working relationships among teachers, this might suggest dramatic reform efforts beyond replacing the principal. Similar lines of inquiry could address district leadership, clerical, or operations staff elsewhere in the organization and guide numerous types of improvement efforts.

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Appendix 1: Phone Interview Guide

1. Intro: I'm conducting a study of efficiency in the work of school leadership, and how school leaders strive to increase their own efficiency, as well as work well with the people around them to maximize what they're able to accomplish.

2. What types of work do you feel that you're able to do efficiently, and what makes that work efficient for you?

3. Could you tell me about a time when you've wanted to get more efficient with a particular type of work, and made a change to how you approached it? What did you do to become more efficient, and how did it work out?

4. What types of work or work circumstances do you feel are inefficient, and why?

5. What are your current sources of frustration about your productivity?

6. Tell me about the tools you use to increase your productivity.

    a. What difference do they make, and are you satisfied with them?

7. What tools have made the biggest difference in your productivity?

    a. What does that tool allow you to accomplish?

    b. How much time do you estimate that this saves you?

    c. Does it allow you to do anything you wouldn't otherwise be able to do?

    d. Does your use of this tool affect other people in any way? How?

8. Are other people involved in using these tools?

    a. How so? Yes – see above.

    b. Does this save them time, or create extra work for them?

9. What advice have you received about productivity that you've modified in your own practice? Why did you modify it, and how is it working for you?

10. Let's talk about the work of leadership that extends beyond what you do personally. Could you tell me about something you've delegated to another staff member in recent memory? How has that worked out in terms of their ability to do it efficiently, and your ability to recapture the time you were spending on it?

11. Who in your school is doing significant work that you'd characterize as leadership work?

    a.   What is that work?

    b.   How did this person end up doing this work—did they initiate it? Did they volunteer for it? Inherit it? Did you delegate it to them?

    c.   What would be the implications for the efficiency of your school if someone else started doing that person's work?

12. Have you ever had to manage conflict around the division of labor—around who is responsible for which tasks?

    a.   What triggered the conflict? Change? Dissatisfaction?

    b.   What did you do to resolve it?

    c.   How has that impacted the efficiency of the people involved?

    d.   How does this approach affect the overall organization?

        (e.g. do you have problems with work flowing to the competent, and the competent getting overwhelmed?)

    e.   What advice have you given in these circumstances?

13. Would you be willing to allow me to come to your school at an agreed-upon date and interview you and key staff that you identify?

Appendix 2: Initial Categories by Research Question

Research Question 1: Sources of Frustration & Barriers to Productivity

What are the common sources of frustration or barriers to principal productivity? In other

words, what reduces principals' efficiency in accomplishing the work of school leadership?

Sources of Frustration & Barriers to Productivity—Core Categories

Mintzberg's "disturbance handler" role.

Unpredictable nature of the job.

Having to deal with non-staff adults in school.

Being a "magnet" for issues.

Dealing with parent, teacher, and student complaints.

Dealing with staff performance issues.(search "custodian")

Interruptions.

Limited ability to adhere to planned schedule due to emergent events.

Mental (emotional, cognitive, scope) demands of the role.

Open door vs closed door.

Administrative tasks.

Reporting requirements.

Redundant or unnecessary reporting requirements.

Changing laws & policies.

Attending meetings.

Meetings held at inconvenient times due to others' constraints.

Inefficient software.

Waiting on others to respond.

Importance of principal secretary.

Importance of trust.

Importance of competence.

The workload.

Taking on additional responsibilities.

Changes in teacher evaluation requirements.

Managing new initiatives.

Managing information and communication.

Work that must be done during the school day.

Volume of email and other communication.

Student discipline & parent follow-up.

Research Question 2: Strategies, Techniques, & Tools for Productivity

What strategies, techniques, and tools do principals identify as helpful for accomplishing their work in an efficient manner?

Strategies, Techniques, & Tools for Productivity—Core Categories

Using calendars.

Large number of meetings.

Calendaring meetings to avoid forgetting them.

Using calendar to manage tasks.

Using task list feature in Google Calendar.

Calendaring time for specific tasks.

Calendaring work time for recurring tasks (e.g. attendance).

Using shared calendars to coordinate school events.

Delegating authority to schedule events based on shared calendar.

Using shared calendars to avoid date conflicts (e.g. fundraisers, facility use).

Using multiple calendars for different purposes.

Preference for paper calendars.

Encouraging staff use of calendars.

Syncing calendars across multiple electronic devices.

Convenience of always having access to electronic calendar, vs. paper.

Getting reminder notifications from calendar tools.

Using multiple electronic calendar views (e.g. day, week, month) without recopying.

Using calendar invitations to coordinate meetings.

Principal secretary management of principal calendar.

Referring others to secretary to schedule time with principal.

Principal making calendar visible to secretary or other staff.

Creating new shared calendars to communicate and coordinate events.

Need for proactive forms of communication in case people don't check calendars.

Principal adhering to calendar in order to accomplish tasks.

Using calendar to deliberately plan day.

Keeping calendar in view while working.

Keeping calendar in view on separate monitor.

Keeping paper calendar in view.

Using commercial hardware & software tools for productivity.

Evernote.

Microsoft Outlook & Office.

Google G Suite.

Gmail.

Google Docs.

Google Calendar.

Google Classroom.

Apple hardware products.

Integration & syncing between tools.

Using teacher evaluation software.

Tracking progress in completing evaluations.

Gaining proficiency with new evaluation system over time.

Using student information systems.

Using cell phone.

Delegating (treated in RQ4).

Visiting classrooms as an efficiency strategy.

Directing others to electronic work process tools.

Electronic forms.

Using systematic approaches.

Research Question 3: Identifying, Adapting, and Using Strategies, Techniques, & Tools to Increase Efficiency

How do principals identify, adapt, and use these strategies, techniques, and tools to complete their work with increasing efficiency?

 Modifying Tool Use

   Encouraging staff use of productivity tools.

Replacing manual processes with electronic tools.

Personal tool use.

Developing a system that works for the individual.

Gaining proficiency with tool over time.

Using electronic tools to facilitate collaboration outside of meetings.

Modifying Staff Norms

Changing the role of team leaders. (see RQ4)

Preventing Wasted Time

Avoiding unnecessary meetings.

Ensuring evaluation deadlines are met.

Improving inefficient processes/systems.

Eliminating unnecessary steps in work processes.

Minimizing handling.

Creating self-service processes for staff, parents, and students.

Clustering classroom walkthroughs by area of building.

Reducing unnecessary communication.

Reply-alls.

Repeated requests.

Reducing interruptions to instructional time.

Protecting staff time.

Research Question 4: Accomplishing Leadership Work with Others

How do principals negotiate and manage the explicit and implicit division of labor, as well as the social rules and interpersonal norms that impact how people work together, in order to ensure the efficient execution of the work of leadership by all involved?

Creating a Shared Vision

   Coaching teachers & developing teacher leadership.

   Conveying rationale for changes to teachers.

   (see code preference for empowering teachers vs directives for a good quote)

   Moving from individual excellence to a systematic approach.

Defining new leadership work.

Introducing changes gradually.

   Communication routines.

   Written newsletters & regular emails.

   Principal involvement to convey importance.

   (See code "principal involvement in instructional technology…" R6 example)

Working as a Team

   Being a team player/importance of flexibility.

   Covering unfilled positions/staff absences.

Helping staff see the whole.

Allowing staff to struggle, grow, learn.

Cultivating Teacher Leadership

   Providing collaborative time for teacher teams.

   Changing the role of teacher team leaders. (see code "redefining staff roles")

   Finding the right teachers to serve as team leaders.

Removing or managing ineffective team leaders.

Creating a school leadership team.

Rotating team members over time.

Getting feedback on new ideas from leadership team.

Teacher PLC leadership.

Relationship between Assistant Principal(s) and Principal

Shared vision among admin team.

Delegation of discipline to assistant principal.

Collaboration on serious issues.

Delegation of some teacher evaluation duties to assistant principal.

Principal retention of certain evaluations.

Dividing evaluations among admin team members.

Observing teachers outside of evaluation roster.

Delegating to develop assistant principal's leadership skills.

Delegating to assistant principal to focus principal time on instructional leadership.

Relationship between Principal and Principal Secretary

Special importance of principal secretary role.

Special importance of trust.

Trust to maintain confidentiality.

Trust to follow through on tasks competently.

Delegating control of calendar.

Going where secretary says to go, according to calendar.

Secretary empowered to interrupt principal.

Secretary screening of calls/meetings for principal.

Secretary taking on principal tasks.

Secretary keeping principal organized.

Secretary using same technology as principal.

Delegation

Importance of delegation.

Administrative tasks interfering with leadership focus.

Reluctance to delegate to overworked staff.

Delegation of decision authority.

Delegating decision authority to those closest.

Decisions about student placement.

Allowing teachers to give input on when they are observed.

Minimizing need for permission to make routine decisions.

Delegating decision authority to disinterested parties.

Purchasing decisions.

Superintendent delegating purchasing authority to principal.

Principal delegating purchasing authority to secretaries, teacher leaders, etc.

Delegation of responsibility.

Benefits of having less to monitor.

Risk of losing credibility.

Risk of reduced knowledge in delegated areas.

Avoiding micromanagement.

Inability to fully delegate responsibility.

Delegating details while retaining responsibility.

Delegation of admin rep role in SPED meetings.

Clarifying roles & responsibilities.

Preventing inappropriate delegation.

Protecting staff focus on core work.

Clear expectations creating efficiency.

Role of indispensable/hard-to-replace staff.

Learning curve of delegation.

Learning how much to trust others with delegated tasks.

Learning how to delegate.

Work that cannot be delegated.

Meeting with parents.

Mintzberg's "symbolic" role.

Delegating work to committees.

Modifying the Division of Labor

Maintaining vs. rethinking division of labor.

Clarifying division of labor.

Documenting key results areas (KRAs).

Clarifying roles & responsibilities.

Differing expectations brought from other schools.

Differing expectations among departments.

Assigning staff to new roles.

Reassigning staff in response to budget cuts.

Assigning atypical duties to office staff.

In-school suspension.

Moving other staff into secretary roles, and secretaries into other roles.

Reallocating responsibilities.

Based on staff preferences.

Based on skills, expertise, and strengths.

To balance workloads.

Seasonal fluctuations in workload.

Based on "fit."

Delegating to staff who will be respected in that role.

Dealing with division of labor among custodians.

Conflict over work ethic/perceived laziness/conscientiousness.

Conflict over relative responsibilities/perceived fairness.

Helping custodians prioritize tasks.

Delegating to counselors.

Responsibility for monitoring student academic progress/eligibility.

Keeping counselors out of disciplinarian role.

Delegating to secretaries.

Relocating secretary work areas within building.

To accommodate additional duties.

To reduce conflict.