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**TRANSFORMING A SYSTEM: LEADERSHIP TO IMPLEMENT  
AN INTERVENTION AND REFERRAL SERVICES PROCESS  
THAT ASSISTS TEACHERS**

by  
Michael J. Lee

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
August 27, 2014

Dissertation Chair: Barbara Bole Williams, Ph.D.



## Dedication

*To My Grandparents –*

*Dedykuję tę rozprawę do mojej babci, Catherine (Kravitz) Gayewski, i do mojego dziadka, Peter Henry Gayewski. Moi dziadkowie ogromnie szanowany wykształcenie: wierzyli osoba była najcenniejszym do siebie, do swoich sąsiadów, a do swojej społeczności, kiedy nieustannie uczyć. Pokazali mi, że uczenie się i nauczanie są częścią tego samego procesu. W uczy mnie jak naprawić ciągnika albo jak upiec chleb, to oni mówią, że uczymy się razem. Moi dziadkowie zachęcił mnie do podjęcia zdrowego ryzyka, ufać ludziom, wierzyć w siebie, słuchać z zainteresowaniem, powiem szczerze, żyć na dziś, aby plany na jutro, i pomóc innym. I szczęśliwie pamiętam wiele letnich w ich domu w kraju wypełnione podziału, przytulanie, śmiejąc się, marząc, pracy i opowiadania.*

## Acknowledgements

Once upon a time ...

And so begins this story as have so many that have come before. However, this is my story and, in the following pages, I will take you on a spectacular journey. You may think to call me Leo; nevertheless, the name my father bestowed upon me was in honor of the Italian Renaissance sculptor, painter, architect, poet, and engineer. And names in my family are very important. Much like the roots and wings my parents provided to me, my name serves as the foundation of my allegorical cathedral. Skyward is the trajectory; lofty are the expectations; and, all too frequently, swift and hurting is the passage back to earth. Yet, this story is as much about self-making and self-telling as it is about the successful completion of my doctoral dissertation.

Be advised that ahead wait many characters, messages, lessons-learned, lies-told, and wicked pleasures that carry my meaning-making beyond ordinariness into the realm of the unexpected and the possible.

The real first chapter opens in the nearly empty and dimly lit hallway of a Brooklyn hospital. My mother, a registered nurse in this very building who only hours before finished her shift and had gone home, is now in the delivery room. My father, still traumatized by the midnight walk to the hospital and being told by the supervising nurse that he needed to stay in the waiting room, is watching a gray mouse scurry along the base of the tiled wall. In a few minutes, the swinging doors burst with light, shouts of joy, cries of a newborn, medicinal scents, and the frenetic movements of the obstetrician who fist-pumps my father with the congratulatory news of a healthy first-born son.

This research study was given many names over the years and many individuals could claim parentage or some influence in its conception. I thank all those partners and

reflect warmly on our shared practices, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and goals. In the resulting narrative as well as in my transforming leadership platform, we wedded education, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, medicine, business, and law. I am proud of the relationships and the people who travelled with me. Some said goodbye too early; some, not soon enough. Others fell behind when I changed direction or ran ahead. I recall Bronx student, Ana Rosa, who could not stop herself from introducing me as “Doc Michael” to her foster mother a quarter-century ago. And, I am indebted to once-ago public high schooler Katie who inspired me to complete this doctoral journey.

I acknowledge the teachers, administrators, and community members who graciously volunteered to participate in this study. Your commitment to transforming our schools and to changing how-we-do-business to improve the lives and futures of our students has been invaluable. Thank you to the Board of Education, our superintendent, our administrative staff, the professional learning communities, and all our educational stakeholders. Your trust, honesty, energy, pride, and aspirations for transformational change enhanced my work, and your generous cooperation is most appreciated. I only hope this completed study and the implemented intervention & referral services (I&RS) process met the standard you anticipated and will be of use to you as we support our teachers and school leaders in improving student achievement in our public schools.

Thank you to Gini Doolittle for reminding me that only active people can create influential relationships, transformations from common ground, and then real change.

Thank you to Barbara Bole Williams, my dissertation chair, and to the other members of my committee, James Coaxum and Herbert Simmerman. And, Herb, through your example, you inspire me with your leadership, compassion, and spirit. Thank you for shining hope when all seemed dark to me.

Thank you to my Mom, Elynor M. Lee, for constantly demonstrating service to others and, on more than one occasion, for stopping traffic at a hectic city intersection and escorting a person-in-need to the other side. Thank you to my Dad, Joseph F. Lee, for taking me to the library on Saturdays and for showing me the magic in books and the authority in words.

Thank you to my family and friends who understood, accepted, or, more often than not, just tolerated that this was an important personal passage. You ensured that obstacles on the road were removed, that bridges were built, that maps were always accessible, and that I would not starve in some wayside culvert. I especially offer my gratitude to my wife Andrea who has patiently supported me along the way. You are my story-telling, meaning-making, and adventure-finding partner! You have been a source of indomitable strength and reassuring stability over the years. And thank you to my children, Abigail, Christopher, Matthew, and Megan, for your time and patience, concern, love and hugs, and most importantly your laughter.

Thank you to Nancy, my sister through love, for the funding for this expedition.

And, thank you to my Rowan University cohort members, for your humor, encouragement, commiseration, and friendship. We learned to “cooperate and graduate” with an acceptance of needing to “pound the rock.” At times, we thought we were only making sand and sore hands. I am proud of our collective experiences and I am grateful for your influences. Though not the *Pieta* or the *David* of Florence, this research study is of my own vision, my effort, my determination, and my own two hands.

*E questa è la mia storia.*

## Abstract

Michael J. Lee  
TRANSFORMING A SYSTEM: LEADERSHIP TO IMPLEMENT  
AN INTERVENTION AND REFERRAL SERVICES PROCESS  
THAT ASSISTS TEACHERS  
2013/14  
Barbara Bole Williams, Ph.D.  
Doctor of Education

Improving instruction to meet diverse student needs via early, intensive, and continuing intervention is an essential part of a comprehensive strategy to serve all students now and to produce the graduates 21<sup>st</sup> century society requires. Yet, meaningful school reform with transforming leadership, innovative vision, conversations among teachers, and authentic student achievement still remains elusive today. Our limitations in putting new ideas into practice come not from a lack of will or effort, but, in part, from the influences of our personal stories, mental models, and an immunity to change. This action research study explores educators' perceptions and behaviors in implementing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, within a school district that traditionally relies on a top-down, political, and status-quo dynamic that obstructs cooperative learning opportunities. The bearing on special education is profound, with a high proportion of struggling students referred for services before any remedial or differentiated instruction is offered. The erstwhile pre-referral process is viewed as a formality, a precursor to a referral to the child study team and ultimately toward classification. During three action plan cycles implemented across 11 schools, I discover that my transformational leadership is derived from servant, democratic, and social justice leadership styles. Moreover, the implementation of an I&RS system makes movement toward organizational change and meaningful improvements with teacher empowerment, classroom-based instruction, and student achievement.



Here are your waters and your watering place.  
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.<sup>1</sup>  
(Frost, 1996, pp. 59-60)

---

<sup>1</sup>I reference the poem “Directive” by Robert Frost. Symbolic and compelling, the story told within holds elemental and indispensable meaning, not only as I reflect upon my life, but also in the message’s relation to this research study and as applied to the status of public education today. This poem gives voice to our hopes and our beliefs, as much as it does to the exacting lament that we cannot go home again.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction to the Study

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

(National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)

Failure by school stakeholders to adopt coherent educational policies and a useful and effective system of scientifically validated instruction, practices, and interventions leaves all students at risk, especially those with disabilities. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) has instigated considerable changes in expectations, climate, and actions of general education classrooms. Yet, meaningful school reform with transforming leadership, fresh educational vision, conversations among teachers, and authentic student achievement remains as elusive today as it has for the past century. School instructors and administrators maintain the status quo with a flair for business-as-usual and seemingly an immunity to change. Therein lies one of the themes of the stories that are repeated in board meetings, faculty gatherings, teachers' lounges, classrooms, and parent-teacher conferences; that, rather than within the science of learning and the practice of teaching, the *problem* exists in the student. However, before referring a struggling student for evaluation for special education services, educational stakeholders need to improve the process by which teachers seek the assistance needed to enhance success for all learners within the general education milieu.

## **Educational Reform: Attending to What Teachers Think and Do**

The four decades following the publication of “A Nation at Risk” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) have been witness to mounting hysteria regarding professional accountability, teacher evaluations and tenure, standardized testing, adequate yearly progress, and student achievement. Despite a preeminence for perennial reform (Cuban, 1993; Elmore, 2000; Marzano, 2003; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Tobin, 1994), the American public school system seems invulnerable to creativity, ingenuity, and successful changes (Branson, 1987; Christensen, Aaron, & Clark, 2005; Evans, 1996). Yet, a silent epidemic (Barton, 2005; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006) and the urgency for improvements within our 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms stand in judgment to our broken promise to the estimated 3.8 million young adults, aged 18 to 24, who are neither employed nor in school (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004). On a yearly basis, nearly one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Swanson, 2004) and, while this may be more directly impacted by peer group instability (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008), poor neighborhood quality (Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard, 2007), poverty (Rothstein, 2008), single-parent homes (McLanahan, 1997), substance abuse (Ellickson, Tucker, & Klein, 2003), teen parenthood (Zachry, 2005), and violence and gang activity (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009), evidence suggests that our predominant, passive learning, instructional approach fails to engage students (Ben-Peretz, 1990; Bolles, 1988; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Goodlad, 1984).

Relatively stable estimates of the population of students who are at risk for school failure range from 20 to 30 percent of the total school population (Institute of Education

Sciences, 2007; National Research Council, 1982; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002). This figure includes approximately 12 to 14 percent of the population of students already identified as special education, leaving nearly 15 to 18 percent of the general population at risk for school failure. Yet, concern grows that school districts identify too many students as disabled under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004). The IDEIA extends the requirements of previous special education statutes (Public Laws 94-142 & 105-117) and strives to ensure that states aggressively provide preventive services to students who might be reviewed for special education referral and/or placement. However, the number of referrals is not matching the statistics for the percentage of students likely to require special education supports and services (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005; Detterman & Thompson, 2006; Institute of Education Sciences, 2007). Data suggest that many students have been misidentified or unidentified (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2001; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). The implication is that some classified students have no disability; instead, they have not been taught.

Every student deserves to be taught and competently guided by an enthusiastic, dedicated, productive, knowledgeable, and effective teacher. Fullan (2007) exclaims that “educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it’s as simple and as complex as that” (p. 129). Without teachers making critical changes in their instructional practices, we cannot prepare students to meet the demands of a future – and of a transforming society – driven by progressive technologies. Further, the focus needs to be on how students learn and what they need to learn to collaborate and compete, in real

time, with individuals from around the globe, using email, teleconferencing, and interactive, innovative software. Teachers need to model instructional practices that focus on “forging relationships rather than executing transactions,” “tackling novel challenges,” and “synthesizing the big picture” (Friedman, 2006, p. 307). And, toward this end, educators need to evolve their methods of instructional delivery from that of a teacher-centered, lecture-based tradition to a student-centered, decision-based learning approach.

### **Myths of the No Child Left Behind Act**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the current incarnation of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, whose purpose was to raise academic proficiency and close achievement gaps. This laudable mission continued with the ESEA of 2001 and will no doubt be renewed in a (much delayed) ESEA of the near future. Yet, as I prepare to disclose my view of three myths that precariously undergird NCLB, I scratch my head, proverbially, and reflect on the accepted fable that our Federal government has the enumerated authority to involve itself with education. It does not. In Article 1, Section 8, of the United States Constitution, where the powers of the federal government are outlined, education and schooling are not mentioned. In my understanding of American history, our Founding Fathers considered education to be a family and local concern, being the rightful domain of state government. Further, the Tenth Amendment of the Bill of Rights clarifies that the “powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively or to the people.” So, like finance, credit, and banking, public schools – or a corporate model of education – are forced to operate primarily in the service of economic and political systems.

As an unprecedented intervention (and interference) by the Federal government into the American education system, NCLB received bipartisan political endorsement because it promised to (a) improve education for all, especially those students who have been historically disadvantaged; (b) stimulate educational and economic productivity in an increasingly globalized economy; (c) decrease educational inequality; and (d) augment assessment objectivity and curricular standardization. United States Education Secretary Arne Duncan concluded that the swelling failure rates of schools to meet adequate yearly progress toward NCLB, as we experience 2014, are a failure of this law (Holland, 2011). He added that, by ignoring the individual needs and circumstances of students and schools and “mandating and prescribing one-size-fits-all solutions,” the concept is “fundamentally flawed.” I concur. Moreover, I believe NCLB has undermined past reforms, such as small schools, authentic formative assessments, and interdisciplinary curriculum, as well as marginalized initiatives, such as pre-referral instruction or intervention programs that have improved students’ learning, particularly in urban school districts (Kozol, 2005).

The next Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will need to focus on how to create classrooms and individualized learning environments that promote innovative, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, engage students, and assess learners on multiple dimensions. Public education needs to be a shared responsibility of parents, community members, educators, students, and policymakers. In addition, the first myth that needs to be dispelled is that teachers come in two models: good or bad; the former, praised, and the latter, fired. The second myth is that students are a homogenous group and (regardless of ability or proficiency, whether they have a disability or recently immigrated to the

United States and are English language learners) are expected to be proficient in every subject. The third myth is that assessment drives results; but, teachers cannot be trusted to evaluate their own instructional practices or to assess their student's learning. Rather than demonizing teachers (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2003) as readily falling prey to "education fads," "bad ideas," and "untested curricula" (p. 19), school districts need to demand pre-service training and ensure ongoing professional development. Further, the ESEA reauthorization needs to provide teachers with useful information on what to do to improve student learning and instruction. As Anyon (2005) writes, "failing public schools in cities are, rather, a logical consequence of the U.S. macro-economy – and the federal and regional policies and practices that support it" (p. 2). The ESEA needs to provide resources to improve instruction while it remedies the substantial inequality of resources afforded to schools and to neighborhoods.

### **Professional Development, Life-long Learners, and PLCs**

Teacher education programs prepare professionals to meet the needs of all students. This statement is infinitely easier to declare than to demonstrate. Students in public schools are an increasingly diverse group, reflecting not only changing population trends and economic conditions in the United States, but also the complexities, specialties, and fallibilities of the individual learner. And learning is not one-dimensional. And, students do not always arrive to the classroom well-fed, rested, and confident; focused, well-behaved, and receptive; and ready to engage themselves passionately in the process of learning. They bring their own intellectual, emotional, social, chemical, technological, cultural, and entertainment agendas. And schools do not easily manage the mandates and requirements for accountability, collaboration, inclusion, and

differentiation. Nevertheless, engagement is at the center of learning, and students (and teachers) are at the center of engagement. John Dewey (1910/1933) coined the term reflective inquiry which explains engagement as the process of identifying difficulties, taking in knowledge – but, “not as ready-made intellectual pabulum to be accepted and swallowed” (p. 257) – and transforming it as one would sustenance, and then reaching a conclusion, so it becomes a part of oneself. This reflective inquiry is a life-long process.

Teachers are required to be life-long learners. However, a review of the history of professional development in education reveals that prior to the 1970s continuing education for teachers was largely unsupported by leadership and, moreover, viewed by both teachers and many researchers as haphazard and fragmented, with little relevance to classroom practices or student learning (Borko & Putnam, 1995; Hatch, Ahmed, Lieberman, Faigenbaum, White, & Pointer-Mace, 2005; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman & Miller 2001). As such, newly certified teachers were expected to be “wound up like an old Victrola ... to play sweet music forever” (Schaefer, as cited by Joyce, 1990, p. xvi). Fortunately, the 1990s witnessed a shift to a paradigm recognizing that teacher development evolves over time and needs to assist professionals to think about how and why they teach. As a shared, public process promoting sustained collegial interactions, as well as job-embedded, site-based, and authentic practices (Bush, 1984; Joyce & Showers, 2003), these professional development models foster the expertise of all active learners within and beyond the classroom. Further, to maximize the impact on the teaching-learning cycle, in-services need to be designed to be intensive and sustained over time, embedded in teachers’ day-to-day work with students (Sparks, 2004), able to engage teachers in active learning of the content to be taught and how to teach that



content (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001), and structured to engage teachers in solving difficulties of practice collaboratively (Guskey, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Expanding on the traditional working together arrangement, Astuto, Clark, Read, McGee, and Fernandez (1993) introduced the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs), in which the teachers and administrators in the school partake in continuous adult learning, vigorous collaboration, and democratic participation. In striving toward consensus about their learning environment and culture and how to achieve a preferred environment and culture, educators in the PLC talk straightforwardly and honestly with each other about their practice, share knowledge, observe one another, and celebrate each other's successes (DuFour, 2004; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). In this team environment, educators engage in ongoing cycles of questioning that promote greater consistency in instruction, increased willingness to try new instructional methods, and ultimately higher levels of student achievement (DuFour, 2004; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2007; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). Research indicates that effective PLCs evidence a shared vision and a collaborative culture (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Feger & Arruda, 2008), a supportive and shared leadership (Hord, 1997; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006), a focus on improving student learning (DuFour, 2004; Louis, 2006), and continuous inquiry and reflective dialogue (Haar, 2003; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006).

With this collaborative partnership centered around the ideas of equality, reciprocity, reflection, voice, dialogue, choice, and praxis (Knight, 2011), educational reform efforts across districts have led to re-conceptualizing leadership – moreover, the

recognition of teachers as instructional leaders – as part of a wide-ranging mechanism to bring about systemic improvements (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002; Taylor, 2008). This shared model of leadership, with teacher-leaders assuming the roles of on-site trainers, mentors, or coaches helping to incorporate research-based instructional methods into their practice (Knight, 2007; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008), intensifies the focus on the teaching-learning continuum (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Elmore, 1995; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Though relatively new in the literature, such an instructional coaching model incorporates a wide variety of professional activities and roles within a school (Deussen, Coskie, Robinson, & Autio, 2007; Matsumura, Garnier, & Resnick, 2010). While avoiding a supervisory stance, coaches utilize their heightened skills in communication, relationship-building, change management, instructional practice, and content knowledge to affect change in their colleagues' practices (Knight, 2006; Taylor, 2008). Moreover, instructional coaches might be recognized by their work in collaborative planning, modeling instruction, conferring, observing, exploring and interpreting data, and providing ongoing team support (Knight, 2007). Yet, there exists a need to better understand how instructional coaching may support teachers in developing effective instructional practices that ultimately result in improved student achievement (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Stein & D'Amico, 2002).

**Moving Toward Things that Give Energy and Life.** Earlier in my doctoral program, I shared with the Benchmark Committee how I paradoxically alternate between the perception of my leadership style – in symbolic artifact – to be carpenter's glue or olive oil. My explanation of being the adhesive that keeps things from falling apart – whether the context is familial, organizational, or societal – as well as being the lubricant

that permits things to move smoothly and with minimal friction and heat, reminded the Chairperson of Tschannen-Moran's (2004) description of "trust" (p. 15). Most coincidentally, this connection with trustworthy relationships speaks to my school leadership role of nurturing a collective vision, modeling preferred behaviors, coaching staff to align their skills with the school's vision, managing organizational resources impartially and competently, and readying myself to mediate the inevitable conflicts that arise in schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2007). I find that teachers are more willing, within a culture of trust, to take the risk to try new instructional strategies to meet the diverse skills of high-achieving students and those with at-risk competencies, without deserting more typically developing students. In cultivating professional learning communities committed to professional inquiry, data-driven decision-making, and best practices, as well as aiding teachers in adapting to new standards of accountability, trustworthy leaders can move their schools to higher levels of achievement with benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

From the perspective offered by appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2007; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) that people (and organizations) move toward things that provide energy and life, Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2010) posit that through coaching – an evocative coaching – school leaders can assist teachers to focus their attention on the things they are doing well, to reintroduce the passion and possibilities of teaching, and to bring staff together to collaboratively and generatively discover innovative directions and promising outcomes that may not have been considered. Clearly, the best curricula and instructional strategies in the world will lead nowhere if teachers are not comfortable in using them or interested in mastering them. So, the leader

who wants to make change within the school needs to unleash creativity – with the group’s energies going up and their resistance going down – as teachers and administrators alike find new solutions to old problems (Schein, 2004). In respecting both the autonomy needs of teachers and the educational standards of the schools in which they teach, evocative coaching emphasizes listening more than talking, asking more than telling, and reflecting more than judging. In a radical sense, this is less about problem-solving and more about thinking differently, positively, and smarter. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran emphasize that evocative coaching prefers empathy and inquiry as approaches that open up teachers to the prospect of change and engage teachers in their own performance-improvement process. By facilitating movement, building trust, understanding feelings, identifying strengths, observing vitalities, crafting visions, brainstorming ideas, and designing experiments, evocative coaching targets self-efficacy and assists teachers to become the professionals they always hoped to be. Through this process, teachers move beyond incremental growth in initiative and technique and toward transformational shifts in attitude, orientation, and approaches to meaningful instruction.

In focusing on both changing how people think (instead of what people do) and supporting self-organizing change processes that flow from new ideas (Bushe & Kassam, 2005), appreciative inquiry (AI) strives to bring about the positive outcomes people desire by highlighting *the positive*. This is the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). As a philosophy of change focused on changing the organization rather than the people, AI approaches change as a journey (rather than as an event) and emphasizes collaboration and participation of all voices in the system. Most

uniquely, AI builds on the life-giving forces present when a system is performing optimally in economic, human, and organizational terms. When teachers are filled with the sense of their own aspirations, strengths, and vitalities, and when they are invited to imagine the possibilities that would make their profession more wonderful, connected (to colleagues, teams, schools, and the district), generous, and joyful, they get fully engaged in self-directed learning (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

The potential of appreciative inquiry as an action research methodology that motivates change by focusing on the exploration and amplification of organizational strengths (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and of evocative coaching as an approach that inspires motivation and movement without provoking resistance or power struggles (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010) influence my leadership and my vision for transformational change within my school district. Through the cycles of this research study, I will be attentive to opportunities where, how, and when evocative coaching might best serve future intervention and referral services (I&RS) teams. Significant professional development will be required. Within the optimally performing I&RS process, coaches would interact with teachers to design, implement, and monitor innovative instructional programs. Teachers would share the stories of their design experiments, including details as to how things went, what worked well, and what things were helpful to them. These conversations between coach and teacher, between I&RS team and administrator, and between school and district would then spread out in every direction like millions of jagged cracks on the waiting surface of a frozen pond. Having huge influence on school environments, these stories would convey not only information but also inspiration. As memes, these stories would evolve as self-propagating, self-

replicating ideas that change behavior, perceptions, and attitudes (Dawkins, 2006). These stories, these conversations would not only align instructional environments, they would become catalysts of school transformation.

### **Pre-referral Intervention Process**

In this section, I introduce a mechanism that has existed in public schools since the 1970s, but which has only indirectly – and sometimes never – been viewed as a professional development vehicle for teachers, by teachers. School-based pre-referral intervention and problem-solving teams were established to differentiate students with disabilities from those whose academic or behavioral difficulties reflected other factors, including inappropriate or inadequate instruction (e.g., Logan, Hansen, Nieminen, & Wright, 2001; Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005; Welch & Sheridan, 1995). With the goal of addressing school-based problems within the general education classroom, a multidisciplinary team and its varying perspectives and areas of expertise designed, employed, monitored, and assessed effective classroom-based strategies to overcome these problems (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003; Safran & Safran, 1996), before a referral to special education. These groups have been researched as: Instructional Consultation Teams (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996), Instructional Support Teams (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999), Intervention Assistance Teams (Whitten & Dieker, 1995), Mainstream Assistance Teams (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990), Peer Problem Solving Teams (Pugach & Johnson, 1989), Pre-referral Intervention Teams (Graden, Casey, & Bonstrom, 1985), Pupil Assistance Committees (Smith, 1994; Taima, 1996), School-based Intervention Assistance Teams (Schrag & Henderson, 1996), School Consultation Committees (McGlothlin, 1981), Teacher Assistance Teams (Chalfant,

Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979), and Teacher Support Groups (Watson & Stevenson, 1989). In sum, researchers have found that when pre-referral teams are implemented with integrity and reliability, they can be effective in addressing the needs of many students with learning and/or behavioral difficulties, and improving teacher's instructional practices with these students.

However, the pre-referral intervention model – unfunded, weakly mandated, and under-regulated – is arguably one of the most inconsistently implemented processes in education (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003; Carter & Sugai, 1989). Further, evidence suggests general education teachers feel disenfranchised from the pre-referral team process and often do not participate (Meyers, Valentino, Meyers, Boretti, & Brent, 1996). Some teachers feel devalued or ignored (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004), others remain uncertain of their role (Logan, Hansen, Nieminen, & Wright, 2001), and some report that the pre-referral team generates ineffective interventions that are not tailored specifically to the target student and are so broad that they are difficult to implement and evaluate (Probst, 2001; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). Compounding the disempowerment, the alienation, and the one-size-fits-all recommendation, the responsibility for implementing interventions is left solely to that assistance-seeking teacher, without training and support (Lane, Mahdavi, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004). National surveys of state education directors (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003; Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005) indicate that less than half of the states provide training on pre-referral instruction or intervention programs to school professionals.

**New Jersey's Intervention and Referral Services Model.** The New Jersey Administrative Code (N.J.A.C., 2007) 6A:16-8.1(a) requires that a coordinated system of intervention and referral services (I&RS) exist within each school and ensure that an appropriate multidisciplinary team assist the student who is experiencing learning, behavior, or health difficulties, and to assist educators who have difficulties in addressing any student's learning, behavior, or health needs. In addition, the I&RS system in each school needs to identify these student difficulties; collect thorough information; develop and implement action plans which provide for appropriate school or community interventions or referrals to school and community resources, based on collected data and desired outcomes; provide support, guidance, and professional development to school staff who require assistance and/or participate on I&RS teams; actively involve parents or guardians in the development and implementation of action plans; coordinate the access to and delivery of school resources and services; coordinate the services of community-based social and health provider agencies and other community resources; maintain records of all requests for assistance and action plans; review and assess the effectiveness of the provisions of each action plan; and, at a minimum, annually review the I&RS action plans and the actions taken, as well as make recommendations to the principal for improving school programs and services, as appropriate (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8.2).

To provide leadership and guidance for educational improvement, the New Jersey Department of Education (1999) reprints a resource manual that offers "direction to school districts regarding required functions, as well as the value of school-based intervention and referral services" (p. 3), in satisfying the unfunded mandates of the law. Though silent on any tactics for how a school might identify, implement, and pay for



effective and enhanced services, curricula, programs, trainings, and personnel, the manual provides forms, flyers, and videos, as well as emphasis on the concepts of collaborative problem-solving, proactive processes, a “coordination of home, community and school resources,” and “professional development, coaching and collegiality,” to name a few. New Jersey’s current Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model and its effectiveness in implementing a “comprehensive strategy for each identified learning, behavior and health problem” (p. 7) remain under-researched. Further, a walk-through in some schools might leave a person with the impression that the I&RS process is poorly under-valued, woefully misunderstood, and lackadaisically implemented.

### **Opportunities and a Challenge**

Shortly after beginning employment as the Supervisor of Special Education in the pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade Echgan Palaber Public Schools (a pseudonymous name) during the 2007-08 school year, I initiated a series of leadership activities in order to learn about this urban district, to introduce myself, and to design new ways of leading, relating, learning and influencing change (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Rost, 1993). For example, I adopted the daily afternoon practice of telephoning five parents or guardians of classified students, at random, to inquire about their child’s program and successes in learning. Also, I started sending out brief monthly email blasts to teachers in the special education department sharing important but often little understood New Jersey Administrative Code mandates. Further, I began holding informal, rather extemporaneous, talk-sessions with all teachers, after the instructional day ended and before the end of their contractual work day. I would select a different school each month, get permission from the principal, advertise the event, bake a cake or three-dozen

cookies, arrange the classroom chairs in a circle, and then enthusiastically await the conversation. During one particular get-together, a visibly agitated high school teacher was coaxed by colleagues to join the discussion. I do not recall the entire word, welcome, leaving my lips before that teacher volcanically interjected:

Listen. I followed the district policy of doing the pre-referral route. I got E.P.E.S.! But nothing happened! And, the Child Study Team didn't even classify him! I know in my heart-of-hearts he is Dyslexic. He needs medication. All his teachers and I agree that he should have an I.E.P. and be placed in a special education classroom. Look at him now; he doesn't come to school. Nobody did anything for this kid. He's lost. Yeah – but I filled out all that E.P.E.S. paperwork; for what? Your Child Study Teams are worthless! (Gerda Kay, interview, 2008)

Nearly two years – and five different dissertation topics – would pass before I returned to the challenge of addressing my district's need for organizational change regarding its pre-referral intervention process, the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.).

During those early years with my district, I recognized absent leadership; a porous administrative structure; inadequately planned and executed initiatives; a dysfunctional and toxic culture; the marginalized – almost hidden – well-intentioned subgroups within the culture; the isolated, pessimistic, and despondent educators; and the ineffective human relations network (Burns, 1978; Fullan, 2001; Schein, 2004). Commitment, enthusiasm, and loyalty to school were scarce. Further, data were evident that we were not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) or safe harbor regarding achievement; we were struggling with student attendance, violence, vandalism, graduation rates, drop-out rates, and post-secondary career realizations; we were being monitored by the New Jersey Department of Education due to significant compliance issues, as well as for elevated classification rates, placement of students in out-of-district settings, and over-representation of minority students in special education; and we resisted the

recommendations of national, state, county, educational, mental health, legal, parent, community, and advocacy agencies to align our pre-referral intervention program with New Jersey's nearly ten year old Intervention & Referral Services (I&RS) model.

Though oversight of the pre-referral process or of the curriculum and instruction department was not assigned to me, my special education department was being viewed under-the-microscope and held to improving the quality of programs, instruction, and achievement outcomes. This challenge, this "basic responsibility ... to improve education" (Leithwood, 2001, p. 229) as a productive leader in my own schools, and this research study called to me to venture out of my comfort-zone. I choose not to perform a perfunctory exercise or to become a subplot or supporting character contributing to my district's prevailing story. Successful leaders, in the literature, demonstrate core leadership practices that make a difference with regard to school improvement and student learning. To build the action plans and to expend the effort to do what some in my district would view as the impossible, I would need to investigate, to understand, and to challenge our educators' mental models, behaviors, attitudes, values, beliefs in their abilities to affect change, and sense of individual and collective efficacy (Senge, 2000). My goal would be no less than overcoming the belief that teachers are withholding their best efforts; in most cases, it seems that they simply do not know how to do what they are being asked to do.

**Leadership and Organizational Change.** Sergiovanni (2007) describes leadership that contributes uniquely to school competence and to school excellence as being comprised metaphorically of energies or forces "available to administrators, supervisors, and teachers to bring about or preserve changes needed to improve

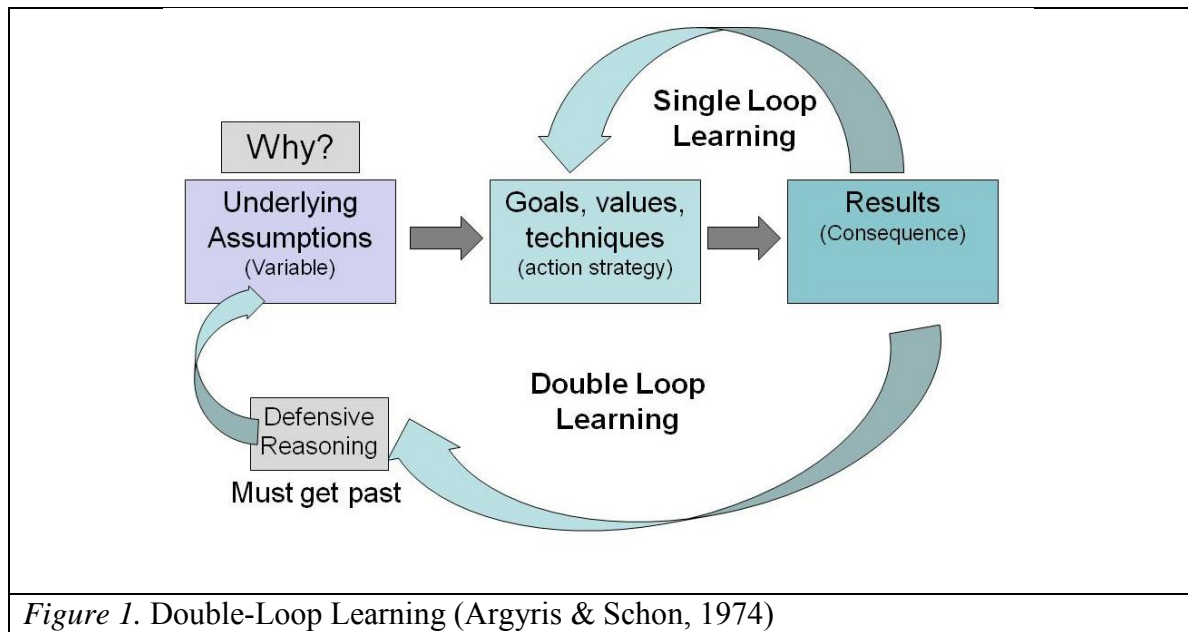
schooling” (p. 7). In later chapters, I will touch upon my experiences with management techniques, dealing with social/interpersonal resources, sound instructional and schooling strategies, symbolic aspects of leadership, and, most critically, the building of a unique school culture. My focus for transformative leadership is on creating excellent schools through an arousing of awareness and consciousness and a bonding of educators that elevate school goals and cultural purposes to a level of shared commitment (Bennis, 1984). I am dedicated to building up the leadership of others and to becoming a leader of leaders. I recognize that transformative leadership has the ability to access greater human potential and to produce levels of performance that are beyond expectations. Further, my platform for leading has elements of democratic practice, social justice, and servant leadership. In providing moral authority, giving a sense of direction, establishing overarching purpose, and protecting the values, cause, mission, and ideals of the school, I understand that “being successful in providing purpose requires the trust of others” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 15). For trust to be forthcoming, my staff must have confidence in my competence, resolve, and principles.

Despite the far-ranging impressions of organizational change in the literature, researchers (Fairweather, Sanders, & Tornatzky, 1974; Fullan, Miles, & Taylor, 1980; Rosenfield, 1992) tend to agree on at least three crucial stages of change and the general activities and considerations related to each. In the first stage of organizational change, there needs to be some degree of readiness, such as support from top management, active participation from administration and staff, or some commitment made to the goals and processes of the project. As I will discuss in greater detail later, readiness had arrived in the Echgan Palaber School District. A second stage in the process of organizational

change is frequently noted when an intervention model has been developed and participants and pilot sites for implementation have been identified. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will describe the involvement, understanding, and support of administration (both at a district and school level) and how these contribute to the identification and in-servicing of school teams, the monitoring of the integrity of our intervention and referral services (I&RS) model implementation, and the emergence of school-based facilitators, consultants, and coaches. In the final stage of organizational change, the primary activity needs to be an expansion and a heightened expertise of the project within each school across the district. Chapter 7 of this study will emphasize how the I&RS model promotes a significant shift in educational service deliveries and necessitates adjustments in both role and social status among educators and support staff. Program evaluation and feedback will be disseminated at this stage to give participants feedback on program implementation and efficacy, and ultimately to improve future practice.

This action research study is grounded upon the theoretical impact of the work of Argyris and Schon (1974) within the field of organizational learning and how it is extended by the Kegan and Lahey (2009) learning platform regarding immunity to change. The primary connection between the two theories has to do with what people say they value (i.e., espoused theory) and what behaviors they choose to demonstrate (i.e., theory-in-use). The ability to change and adapt the complex meaning-making system within each person and within the organization has everything to do with closing the gap between the espoused theory and the theory-in-use. Yet, this is not as easy as it sounds. Critically, and both theories have similar explanations, self-protection mechanisms create dysfunction that impedes deep, meaningful change and the transformation of assumptions

and paradigms. For Argyris (1994; 2008a; 2008b), a defensive mental model that was developed early in life to deal with emotionally threatening issues interferes with double-loop learning (see Figure 1). Kegan and Lahey (2009) describe anxiety and oppositional forces that give rise to an immunity to change which stalls the transformation process.



In Chapter 3, I will devote more attention to explaining these two theories and to weaving my own personal espoused theory and theory-in-use into the research study. I am optimistic that an intervention model can result from the merging of these two theories. Specifically, the learning platform to diagnosing and investigating one's immunities to change can be an antidote to limitations in applying and achieving second-order change.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine teachers' and administrators' perceptions and behaviors in developing and implementing an intervention and referral

services (I&RS) process within the public schools where I am employed as the District Supervisor of Special Education. The research and strategies involved engaging staff in focus group sessions, collaborative articulation meetings, team-building activities, and professional development workshops. Through an evocative influence intended to reinvigorate “teaching practices so that students can flourish” (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010, p. xix), I employed interactions and conversations as catalysts for transformation, to share our efforts and our inspirations, in order to promote readiness through self-propagating, self-replicating ideas (i.e., memes) that change behavior, perceptions, and attitudes (Dawkins, 2006). In addition, I explored my development as a leader at the Echgan Palaber Public Schools and through the Rowan University Educational Leadership doctoral program. In confronting my own immunity to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) through reflective practice, I nurtured professional development practices that ensure struggling students individualized, intensive, meaningful, and sustained instruction and interventions prior to consideration for special education.

**Research questions.** Specifically, this study addressed these five questions:

1. Leadership
  - a. How can I establish a partnership of administrators, teachers, support staff, and other learning community members in order to honestly and critically evaluate our current teaching practices for struggling learners?
  - b. How can my leadership engage the educational stakeholders for the purposes of developing and then implementing an intervention and referral services process that enhances the overall quality of instruction in each of our schools?

- c. How can my leadership provide a road map to creating and sustaining a school culture based on mutual trust and respect where the organization institutionalizes the essential changes for doing the important work of teaching, learning, and leading?
2. Organization
    - a. How have the suggestions of the educational stakeholders been incorporated within the organization to build a learner-centered intervention and referral services process that enhances the vision of school improvement and shares the responsibility for its success?
3. Change
    - a. What has occurred within this organization when the professional learning community was allowed to shift from isolated practices to collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility, the freedom to ask for assistance, and the opportunity to overcome an immunity to change?

**Significance of the Study.** Schools – with their general education and special education programs – are in a period of significant change; and the evolution and success of the pre-referral instruction process will necessarily reflect these changes, as well as our educational community’s need to remove all obstacles to student achievement, for all students. Therefore, there is momentous value in considering the current state of practice in this area. The significance of this study is in its contribution to the existing body of knowledge on organizational change, teacher education and ongoing professional development, leadership on all levels, and the interdependencies among all educational stakeholders, from the perspective of my prekindergarten to twelfth grade school district



in New Jersey. Though I loath to speak in terms of problems (as I prefer *decisions*), the Echgan Palaber School District lacks an effective I&RS process; a response-to-instruction model; a culture of trust; instructional leadership; and a plan “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state standards and state academic assessments” (No Child Left Behind Act, Title 1, § 1001). This study was not intended to determine the impact of unique pre-referral instruction programs or strategies on student achievement; to demonstrate the impact of specific research-based instructional strategies with struggling learners; or, for that matter, to quantify changes in student achievement, graduation rates, referrals to special education, or classification rates. Conversely and most optimistically, this study was intended to inspire every teacher to reflect: If my student cannot learn the way I teach, I will teach the way my student learns.

### **Overview of Methodology and Action Plan**

Overall, the primary purposes of this action research study were to improve the pre-referral instruction process within the Echgan Palaber School District and to inform my emerging and transforming leadership theory-in-use. By incorporating Lewin’s action research model, specifically the spiraled and recursive steps of (a) planning, (b) acting, (c) observing, and (d) reflecting (Lewin, 1946; Sanford, 1970), I developed and implemented a new intervention and referral services (I&RS) system, policy, and resulting procedures set forth in Board of Education doctrine and district practices. Along with my reflections, the teachers’ and administrators’ experiences within the new process were collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Importantly, the action research cycles continually informed the renewal of investigation and assessed the impact the new

process had on organizational life. In the research cycles, I investigated and understood how my leadership evolved.

### **Limitations and Implications**

In the hospitals, banks, construction sites, restaurants, retail businesses, and schools where I have worked, I have gotten the impression that the grander the dilemma, the grander the motivation for change, and the grander the expectation for a desired outcome. But, those organizations have aimed – and settled – for first-order change rather than second-order change. Equally perplexing is that change means different things to different people; most critically, to the individual doing the implementing. I recognize that change itself has limitations and implications. Whereas change creates confusion, instigates competing commitments, provokes loss, challenges competencies, causes conflict, and leads to worrisome assumptions, people embrace change and people resist change. Further, it seems there are as many ways of effecting change as there are situations requiring change. I accept Robert Evan’s (1996) assertion that “change itself proves Protean, its implementation Sisyphean” (p. 4).

In this study, I recognized several anticipated limitations as they relate to my participant-researcher role, the school district, and to selected methodology. First, as a district administrator, I was known to everyone who participated in the surveys, questionnaires, focus group sessions, professional development workshops, and interviews. Staff responses may have been influenced. Further, as the District Supervisor for Special Education, I am recognized as the Code (i.e., N.J.A.C.) expert, as well as the gatekeeper for referrals to the Child Study Team. While I am not the supervisor for the pre-referral process (i.e., E.P.E.S.), there might have existed the perception that I

intended to influence or otherwise regulate the decision-making potential of that team. In these circumstances, staff may have not fully, accurately, or honestly reported their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, or actions. A related limitation could have involved my organization's opinion of my status as a doctoral student in an educational leadership program and the implication that I attempted to alter the district, its hierarchy, its political dynamics, its traditions, or its history of doing things. At any point in the study, change – or even the perception of doing things differently – might have provoked push-back from the Board, the administrative team, the teachers' association, specific teachers, or other educational stakeholders.

Regarding my choice of methodology, there are limitations associated with the non-randomness of the selection of participants. A social bias might have put the findings at risk in that participants – they are, my colleagues, staff I supervise, and individuals who work in our schools – could have been compelled to present themselves or their practices in a most favorable light. The use of transcriptions for interviews, as well as of interpretations of responses on surveys, might have resulted in distorted or inaccurate information. In addition, the size of the school district and number of participants in the various cycles of the study might restrict the generalizability to other educational settings.

Finally, the limitation of greatest concern to me involved the real time needed to advance a restructuring school reform within my school district. To exceed first-order change and optimally succeed with second-order change, the growth process would need to be systemic in nature with the impact of altering the organization's assumptions, goals, structures, roles, norms, and, potentially, the culture. Therefore, this action research study

includes findings and implications that will inform future research conducted within and by this school district and, perhaps, others.

### **The Spiraled, Recursive, and Winding Road <sup>2</sup>**

In 1896, John Dewey commented in a letter to the University of Chicago that the foundations of America's entire educational system are "being left unduly to the mercy of accident, caprice, routine or useless experiment from lack of scientific training" of technique, in the use of learning theory, and in successful combination with teachers (cited by Goodland, 1994, p. 3). In part, Dewey was passionately lobbying for the simultaneous renewal of schooling and the education of educators. Little has changed in the past century. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) reemphasized our nation's distress regarding the ever-increasing number of students in special education and the necessity to expand the repertoire of educational supports available in the general education setting for students who are at-risk for academic failure. Clearly, better teachers shape better schools, and these schools along with the programs for the education of educators must be renewed together. If we are to understand the "organization and institutional factors that influence the process of change as governments, teacher unions, school systems, and communities interact" (Fullan, 2007, p. xi), our perspective needs to be a bottom-up approach that integrates the voice of the educational culture. This culture greatly influences teachers and affects student growth that may potentially occur within their classrooms. The knowledge, efforts, instructional strategies, and transformation of teachers play key roles in the change

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<sup>2</sup>Inspired by the legendary shortest of short stories ("For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.") attributed to Ernest Hemingway, I adopted the technique of summarizing significant sections of this dissertation document with a heading of only six words. The lesson I learned was that it is not essential to prattle on endlessly to tell a good tale.

process; and, like change itself, the culture in which the teacher works is equally significant. As transformational leaders, we need to foster our educators' dedication to academic quality, competence with the subject matter and learning theory, curiosity and a driving need to know, care and positive affirmations for students and colleagues, and deliberation in providing perspective and empowerment (Orlofsky, 2001). Clearly, the profound change we seek will only emerge from a learning "organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (Senge, 2006, p. 14).

Throughout this research journey, I intend for my leadership theory-in-use to nurture positive, trusting relationships between myself and all stakeholders, as well as among intervention and referral services (I&RS) committee members and instructional staff seeking assistance and among administrators, teachers, and support staff operating within this new paradigm. Confidently, I trust that the new I&RS process will flourish and succeed in generating smarter, better ways of thinking about teaching, unprecedented interest and professional buy-in, extraordinary support on all levels throughout the district, and profound impact on our organization, on our business of educating leaders of the future, and on our story of school and student hope and success.

## Chapter 2

### Leadership Theory-In-Use

The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served... Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?

(Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14)

Effective leaders are defined by their ability to be self-reflective, to recognize possibilities and create new opportunities, and to be steadfast in their articulation of and emphasis on values, beliefs, vision, hope, trust, goals, and action. My leadership style is designed through the understanding that successful change in any organization – school or business – requires an ability to delineate the issues, to build coalitions with a willingness to share leadership responsibility, to satisfy the needs of the organization and its individual constituents, to encourage others to develop their own leadership potential, and to be mindful that “we participate in a world of exquisite interconnectedness” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 158). Moreover, with vigorous communication of the leader's message or story being a “key to leadership, as well as to the garnering of a following” (Gardner, 1995, p. 62), transformative ideas for the future can be shared, with metaphor and impact, and can motivate listeners to great effect. I believe that telling one's story is a powerful communal act of making meaning, of reasoning and making sense of the world, and of constructing identity within, via, and for the benefit of culture (Bruner, 2002). For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., did not just have a dream; he catalyzed a social

movement by describing his dream and “it became public and therefore accessible to millions of people” (Pondy, 1978, p. 95). This research study is one of my stories. By applying leadership theory with opportunities to integrate innovative instruction and resources to workplace difficulties that I experience on a daily basis, I explain my versatility with the relationship between theory and practice; the context in which administrators and teachers coordinate their efforts; the application of theory and contextual knowledge to school-community problem-solving; the development of my analytical and communication skills to be a successful leader; and my capacity to foster and sustain excellence in my organization and within myself as a life-long learner.

### **Core Values of a Human Being, a Professional, and a Leader**

Drawing from the writings of Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002), I aspire to be a great leader who moves people. I strive to ignite passions and inspire the best in all. My effectiveness might be defined in terms of my strategy, my vision, and my potent ideas, but most critically it is framed by my competencies, my conversations, and my relationships. Moreover, I recognize that effective leadership insists on thoughtful examination of who I am as a human being, a professional, and a leader. Through this I am an educational visionary, offering direction and expertise to ensure that students learn. In my schools, staff know that I understand and appreciate their work; I recognize their challenges and frustrations; and I commend and celebrate their successes. My teachers view me as a trusting partner in education, learning with and from them.

An effective school leader must be a highly qualified professional with the theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, personal dispositions, and readiness to perform as a visionary, instructional, and community leader and as a strategic manager.

As a progressive, courageous, and unwavering agent of educational change and continuous improvement, the school leader must emphasize ethics, decisions, actions, and human interactions as they promote student achievement. Through my commitment to complete my doctoral studies at Rowan University, I have taken the first steps in transforming myself: enhancing my leadership skills; understanding and accepting the change process; acquiring awareness of the congruence of leadership and organizational culture; developing my expertise, as a researcher; and examining and implementing policies. I am closing the gap between my espoused theory and my theory-in-use.

**Hope, Sharing, Humanness, and Vision.** I have never been particularly fond of listening to my own voice from an audio-recording, appraising the reflection of my image in a mirror, or sharing with an audience how I contributed to the completion of a project. The space outlined by the limelight can be the livingroom for someone other than me. Nonetheless, through this research study I have listened more closely, focused more intently on behaviors, and reflected on the process of profound change – mine and the organization’s. I recognized how hope is nurtured by my servant leadership, sharing is nurtured by my democratic leadership, humanness is nurtured by my social justice leadership, and my vision is nurtured by transformational leadership. In fact, I view my leadership platform as a continuum of servant leadership (first) leading into social justice and then into democratic, with the cycle ultimately and continuously informing my transformational leadership.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Several years would pass before Downton’s (1973) term, transformational leadership, would emerge from the research related to distinguishing extraordinary



leaders from the ordinary. In his seminal work, Burns (1978) describes leadership as having the ability to induce “followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers” (p. 19). This transformational leader takes the initiative to make pathways and connections throughout the organization that cultivate communication and partnerships. Further, the leader increases awareness about what is important and obtains support by inspiring followers, or members, to identify with a vision that reaches beyond their own immediate self-interests. Accepting that all those involved have something to offer, the transformational leader brings out the best in each follower by appealing to higher ideals, such as hope, liberty, equality, justice, and peace. For Burns, the behavior of transformational leadership is characterized by considering, appreciating, and treating each member of the organization as an individual. Yet, in symbolically uniting leader and follower and successfully melding the objectives of all those involved in the organization, the transformational leader moves the organization forward. This practice encourages individuals to work for awe-inspiring goals, to be self-motivating, and to seek sources of self-actualization within the organization.

From my first reading of Burns’ (1978) explanation of transformational leadership, I aspire to be that inspirational leader who employs vision, displays a sense of mission and confidence, increases optimism, fosters enthusiasm, and earns respect, loyalty, and trust. In addition, I expect myself to pay attention to the personal needs of my staff, to coach and advise staff, and to aid each staff in becoming successful. Moreover, I emphasize intelligence, rationality, problem-solving, and new approaches. I am aware that transformational leadership has been advocated as the preferred model for

school leadership by many educational researchers (e.g., Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1993; Leithwood, 1992; Schlecty, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1991; Spears, 1996). My leadership must be aligned with a collective purpose and my effectiveness must be judged by my ability to make meaningful social, organizational, and educational changes.

**Transformational Leadership and Transactional Leadership.** Positing that leaders are neither born nor made, but instead evolve from a structure of motivation, values, and goals, Burns (1978) considers leaders to be either transactional or transformational. The transactional leader exerts influence by setting goals, clarifying desired outcomes, providing feedback, and exchanging rewards for accomplishments. In simple terms, the work gets done because the employees are drawing a paycheck. Conversely, the transformational leader exerts additional influence by broadening and elevating members' goals and providing them with confidence to perform beyond the assignments and duties of their contract. In effect, the employees equate their own success with that of the organizations' and identify with the organizations' values and goals. Extending this leadership discussion, Bass and Avolio (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1990) build upon the contributions of Burns (1978) and incorporate the work of House (1977), Zaleznik (1977), Tichy and Devanna (1986), Bennis and Nanus (1997), and other researchers.

Bass (1985) suggests that transformational leadership and transactional leadership are at opposite ends of a continuum; separate, yet related. He asserts that leaders may exhibit analogous characteristics related to both transactional and transformational behaviors, or neither. This distinction between the two is comparable to an earlier discussion (Zaleznik, 1977) of the relationship between managers and leaders. For Bennis

and Nanus (1997), “managers do things right, and leaders do the right thing” (p. 21). To a certain extent, transactional leaders sustain a routinized, non-creative but stable environment, striving to preserve the status quo (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Wielding bureaucratic authority, emphasizing task completion, and depending on rewards and punishments, transactional leadership does not bind leader and members together in any endearing way. On the other hand, transformational leadership affects a responsive, innovative environment by joining leader and members within a collaborative process that impacts the entire organization to achieve fundamental or higher-order change. Further, theorists contend that transformational leadership is preemptive, affirmative, and ultimately more effective in motivating members to achieve higher performance (Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2002), with members evidencing higher levels of commitment to their organizational mission, a willingness to work harder, greater levels of trust in their leader, and higher levels of cohesion (Avolio, 1999).

The transformational leader articulates the organization’s shared vision in a clear and appealing manner, explains how to attain the vision, acts confidently and optimistically, expresses confidence in the members, emphasizes values with symbolic actions, leads by example, and empowers members to achieve the vision (Yukl, 2002). To accomplish this, the transformational leader needs to be adept at knowing the culture, the climate, and the environment and then developing and sharing strategic goals that capture the attention and interest of the members. To this end, Bass (1985) identifies four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence (i.e., charisma; involves integrity in the form of ethical and moral conduct, as well as role-modeling that evokes admiration, respect, trust, and emulation); inspirational motivation (i.e., arousing a team’s

spirit through optimism and enthusiasm; involves articulating a clear, appealing, and inspiring vision, promoting autonomy, committing to goal-attainment, building relationships, and communicating with, working with, encouraging, and challenging employees); intellectual stimulation (i.e., stimulating creativity by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and applying new approaches; involves challenging the status quo, with innovation, rationality, consensus, decision-making, and coaching); and individualized consideration (i.e., offering personal attention in a supportive climate; involves recognizing and accepting individuals' differences, competencies, needs, and desires, through encouragement and a caring for and coaching of individuals, within an open, consultative approach). In essence, transformational leadership is a process of building commitment to organizational objectives and then empowering members to accomplish those objectives.

The research of Bass and associates is important for education, as it has influenced the work of Leithwood and Sergiovanni who claim that transformational leadership expands the concept of instructional leadership to satisfy the demands of the current climate of school reform. The positive association between transformational leadership and follower behaviors is well documented (Fuller, Patterson, Hester, & Stringer, 1996; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996), and studies have begun to examine the process by which those effects are ultimately realized (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2003; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). In the following section, I briefly explore transformational leaderships as a conceptual framework for school leaders.

**An Evolving Paradigm for School Leadership.** Transformational leadership is closer to the prototype of leadership that people have in mind when they describe their ideal leader and is more likely to deliver a role model in which employees want to identify. I understand how transformational leadership, with its inherent vision, is well suited for school restructuring. Transformational leadership is seen as the model which can effect positive growth (Hoover, 1987; King, 1989) and build commitment in school personnel, which is more critical than control, and foster development of the capabilities of school staff which must be able to respond to school reform efforts (Jantzi & Leithwood, 1996). With most research pointing to the teacher as the critical component in learning, it is important that the teacher embrace change. I welcome the opportunity for transformational leadership to redefine education where “every teacher is a leader, every leader is a teacher” (Schlechy, 1990, p. 154).

For the transformational leader to be successful, Bennis and Nanus (1997) have identified the following skills: a strategic vision or goal that evokes people’s attention; the ability to clearly communicate that vision through words, manners, or symbolism; the capacity to build trust by being consistent, dependable, and persistent; and the presence of positive self-regard in striving for success. The use of these four skills builds follower commitment and encourages them to adopt the leader’s vision as their own. They also perform their jobs better, engage in more organizational citizenship behaviors, and make better or more creative decisions. An effective leader, one whose vision is accepted by the followers, will empower the employees and make them to feel significant, to engage in learning, to feel part of a team, and to feel that work is exciting, challenging, fascinating, and fun. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) found that transformational leadership

significantly predicted a positive school culture, effective classroom conditions, and student identification with the school. Much of the motivating power for reform comes from the leader's enthusiasm and self-confidence. Transformational leaders are charismatic and able to motivate individuals when doubt or prejudices prevail. When a teacher may question her effectiveness in working with a struggling learner, as well as a disabled, minority or poverty student, the confident and energetic leader can dissipate those doubts and convince the teacher of the importance of her work. In addition, research supports the reciprocal, dynamic process of transformational leadership that positively impacts school culture, classroom conditions, climate, extra-effort, commitment, satisfaction and teacher efficacy, and student achievement.

Culture and leadership are intimately coupled; and, next to how the leader defines his role, the most important thing is how he manages or creates culture (Schein, 2004). Simply stated, culture – the norms, beliefs, and values of an organization – is the way things are, and the leader must understand why things are this way before attempting to make changes. Schein advances the idea that leaders create and transform cultures, while managers live within them. Moreover, if the leader does not become conscious of the culture in which he exists, the culture will manage him. The implication here is that of an entrenched, business-as-usual system where first-order, transactional changes, such as new instructional initiatives or use of a new form, become the extent of organizational growth. On the other hand, transformational leadership affects changes in the structure and the culture of the school. Leithwood (1994) argues that school restructuring requires both first- and second-order changes, with a transforming leadership that is “sensitive to organization building, developing shared vision, creating productive work cultures, and

distributing leadership to others” (p. 500). Supporting the notion that leader’s nurture culture, Deal and Peterson (2000) suggest that one of the most important roles of a leader is to give meaning to his organization through the design, refinement, and inspiration of symbolic activity. In sum, school researchers have examined the positive impact of transformational leadership of principals (Binkowski, Cordeiro, & Iwanicki, 1995; Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood, Jantiz, Silins, & Dart, 1993) and teachers (King, 1989; Silins, 1994) on school culture, in promoting particular school results (e.g., goal achievement, student performance).

Although this is not intended to be an exhaustive summation of the contributions of transformational leadership in the school setting, studies support the positive impact on classroom conditions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), school climate (Chirichello, 1999; Ellett & Walberg, 1979; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Smith & Piele, 1997; Taylor & Tashakkori, 1994), staff satisfaction (Hoover, 1987; Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992; Koh, Steers, & Terborg, 1995), student achievement as measured by standardized tests (Egan & Archer, 1985; Silins, 1994), teacher efficacy (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Guskey, 1988), and teacher empowerment (Ross, 1998). Overall, research reveals that transformational leadership appears to improve student outcomes by influencing the commitment and extra effort of teachers.

**Two Criticisms of Transformational Leadership for Schools.** A review of the literature from the last three decades suggests that criticism of transformational leadership primarily hinges upon a difficulty in interpreting outcomes regarding generic organization and management prescriptions in the business and military worlds to those in education (Ackroyd, Hughes, & Soothill, 1989; Hood, 1991; Stewart & Walsh, 1992).

Since there is a difference between making widgets (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009) or hand-churning blueberry ice cream (Vollmer, 2010) and educating children, appropriate leadership actions and responses are likely to vary with the unique organizational circumstances that leaders face, even down to the level of the individual school, the profiles of the students and the teachers, and the personal characteristics of the leader(s), including their values and ethics (Bredeson, 1993; Cheng, 1991; Hoy & Brown, 1988). The first specific criticism for implementation of transformational leadership in the educational setting is that focus is excessively upon those at the top of the organization (April, MacDonald, & Vriesendorp, 2000; Lewin & Regine, 2000). An emphasis on the single-leader perspective is judged in the educational research to be particularly detrimental to the collegiality and democratic governance most often associated with schools. Further, the transformational school leader has been portrayed as a threat to democratic governance because he exhibits an “anti-traditional orientation and obsession with self-promotion, rule-breaking, power politics, risk-taking, and radical change” (Terry, 1998, p. 197). A second criticism of transformational leadership in schools is that organizational context is often underemphasized or, at best, vaguely understood when taking into account educative and pedagogic values, social and professional relations within the school, constructs of educational community and collegiality, and the commitments to greater social equity and inclusiveness (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993; Bryman, Gillingwater, & McGuinness, 1996; Leahy & Wilson, 1994).

**In Search of Voice (or Echoes of a Transactional Past).** In the preceding paragraphs, I presented my understanding of how transformational leadership creates change. Moreover, I discuss how transformational leaders empower and motivate



members to move beyond their personal interests to help realize the collective goals of the organization. These leaders enhance members' capacity to think on their own, to develop innovative ideas, and to question out-moded strategies. Further, through active engagement on tasks, the members advance their levels of self-management and self-development. Yet, I offer little on my leadership platform: who I am now, where I have come from, how influences occurred in my life, and what I would want to occur in terms of the profound change in my leadership.

Four years before I matriculated into Rowan University's Educational Leadership Program, I enrolled in their Leadership Theory course in order to partially complete the requirements for my supervisor's certificate. At the time, I was working as a school psychologist and there was an opportunity for advancement. As the newest hire among the 14 child study team members, I accepted that such a preferment might be viewed contemptuously by the veterans. However, my promotion would not even rank in the top 20 calamitous events that rocked this kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade district before, during, and after my tenure. A lawsuit would bring intense local and national media scrutiny of not only Board policies, administrative leadership, teaching practices, and compliance with federal and state disabilities law, but also small-town rivalries, résumé-jealousy, and privileged status. In the aftermath, school leaders would be terminated, parents would lose faith in the schools, teachers would further distrust the administration, and the educational process would retreat behind closed classroom doors into innocuous, mundane, and inexplicit practices. Further, the ranks of central administration would be filled by so-called "out-of-towners," "hatched-men," and "businessmen focusing on the bottom-line" who were told by the Board to "bring us back to our former glory." There

was pervasive mourning, confusion, fear, and anger. As the new supervisor for special education, my leadership efforts, ideas, and enthusiasm were met with suspicion and reluctance. In dreamlike retrospect, it was as if no one could hear my voice – not even I – and, after a while, the image of me rolling the district uphill became more farcical than heroic. The district was not ready, and neither was I.

For that graduate course, my classmates and I were encouraged to record ourselves developing our leadership platforms. I found myself talking into the tape recorder primarily when I was driving: my decompression, transition, down-time from home to work to Rowan to other responsibilities. How dull; what did I have to say that was noteworthy? Over time I began to look beyond how I was saying things and toward what needed to be said. I started to describe – to myself – exchanges I had with teachers, students, parents, and community members. I reiterated their successes, disappointments, and plans. Then I reflected on their encouragement, passion, and hope. This was evocative and appreciative. I considered how powerful this was – these voices, my voice – as a forum for rousing emotions, celebrating happenings, spreading news, and fostering relationships.

On a cold February morning, I drove the three hours to be with my Mom who was in the hospital being treated for cancer. No one recognized how grave her condition was. During this visit, she drifted peacefully in and out of consciousness. The image was surreal: My Mom – a once robust, impulsive, bull-in-the-china-shop, shoot-from-the-hip, emergency room nurse who governed my childhood home in Machiavellian grandeur – was still and quiet. At times, I turned on the tape-recorder and dialogued about some aspect of work or of my leadership or of my life. Sometimes my Mom asked if I were

talking to her. When I explained how I was using this technique, she weakly exclaimed: “Michael, my son, the doctor ... always thinking, always helping .... still trying to make the world a better place.” When I kissed her goodbye that afternoon, I did not realize that this would be the last time. As coincidence would have it, I was headed to Rowan for my 7:30 p.m. Leadership Theory class with Dr. Doolittle.

As I reflect on that time of my life and on those inner and outer voices, I note how I started a journey of self-discovery and personal transformation. The intense emotions, energy, symbolism, and stewardship remain. Leadership begins from within (Bender, 1997) and, for me, what I do and how I do it is shaped by who I am. I experience how leadership can bond people together or drive them apart, can create harmony out of disorder or promote bedlam, can inspire or extinguish, and can make things happen or put a damper on all activities. In the next section, I explore how I “lead people by coaching, empowerment, persuasion, example, and modeling” and “foster trust through individual character and competence at the personal level” (Covey, 1998, p. xvii).

### **My Leadership Platform for School Change**

As one might warm beside a fire, I tend to the flames of effective teaching with the enveloping belief that all students truly can learn and that their zeal for erudition is palpable. Students must achieve the highest academic standards to be productive members in our global society and workforce. Inextricably linked, the quality of school leadership and of teaching are the two most critical factors to ensure equal opportunity and achievement for all students. Further, inspired leadership is the driving force – the key to success for all students – behind significant educational change and continuous improvement of schools. Given their critical role in the educational process, leaders for

21<sup>st</sup> century schools must have the knowledge, skills, and personal dispositions to be effective visionary and community leaders, effective instructional leaders, and strategic managers. Through understanding of who I am and what I believe in, I am committed to public education and the essential school leadership to affect positive growth and change.

With my commitment to lifelong learning, I am transforming my voice, my platform, and my mission as a school leader. The face of leadership is coming into focus; it is less elusive; and I recognize it as mine. Importantly, I am discovering that powerful leadership is identified by meaningful, specific, and steadfast actions. Not just limited to managing the building effectively, the school leader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to establish a vision for learning; foster relationships within and outside the school community; sustain a school culture; act in an ethical manner; engage the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context; and promote effective use of technology. As articulated by Osterman and Kottkamp (2004): “For schools to change, educators have to change.” In my evolution, I embrace new practices. I seize time for reflection. I network and brainstorm with other administrators and educators. I take healthy risks and I let others know that I am venturing into unfamiliar territory and I encourage them to do the same. And, I articulate publicly the ideas, the research, the outcomes and data, the actions, and the dreams that are important to me. In addition to being a servant leader, I define myself as a “cheerleader, enthusiast, nurturer of champions, hero finder, wanderer, dramatist, coach, facilitator, builder” (Peters & Austin, 1985, p. 265).

I am fortunate to have been raised by my Mom and Dad who continually accentuated the values of family, education, religion, justice, honor, values, and community. Through their actions and example, I follow a code of ethics (see Appendix

L) that dictates that I – be a member of the family; hold the door for the person behind me; be productive, be useful, and be helpful; know as much as I can about everything; do no harm to anyone; ask for help when I need it; leave the situation better than when I arrived; and be generous with my time, gifts, friendship, stories, adventures, and smiles. My maternal grandparents contributed to this foundation by offering this kid from Brooklyn endless opportunities to spend on a farm in Pennsylvania. The adventures were profound and wonderful; and I can link my current interests and aptitudes to time spent in a cornfield, on the back of a tractor, in a barn, in my grandmother’s kitchen, in my grandfather’s woodshop, at the lake, or hiking endless mountain paths. In addition, I have worked with remarkable individuals – colleagues and bosses – and in various employments that have underwritten my leadership style.

**A Servant Leader.** The servant leader values and cultivates people, helping them to grow, thrive, and succeed. Credited with initiating the servant-leadership concept, Greenleaf (1977) opined that this leadership attitude is the genuine desire to serve others for the common good, where self-interest gives way to collective human development. Incorporating a service-oriented ethic and the ideals of a shared vision, empowerment, community-building, power-sharing, process-centering, and team decision-making, the servant leader is recognized less by the quality of the decision that is made and more by how he exercises his responsibility and with whom he consults to reach this decision. Not surprisingly, the commitment to servant leadership involves a deeply spiritual undertaking that relies on hope and faith in the capacity of people. A servant leader inspires optimism which empowers people to be highly effective, committed, and motivated to the service of the organization (Cerff & Winston, 2006). Further, with

“confidence that things will work out” (Bennis, 1999, p. 3), the leader nurtures the hope in people to make the organization and, ultimately, the world a better place.

I identify myself as a servant leader and accept the responsibility that the process of my leadership will ensure that teachers, colleagues, and support staff understand the goals of our schools and our district, are committed to this mission, and are skilled in what must be done to guarantee student achievement. To the greatest extent, I view myself as consultative, relational, and self-effacing by nature, and I realize that I cannot lead alone or succeed alone. Moreover, the talents I offer include my acceptance of and empathy for others; my self-awareness and attention to ethics and values; my facility with visioning, decision-making, planning, and implementing; my communication and interpersonal skills; my emotional strength and energies; my commitment to the growth of every individual within my district; and my fostering of hope and a community spirit.

***Influencing Hope.*** In the early 1970s, my Uncle Chuck would take vacation from his job in the hardware store in Peoria, Illinois, and head East with his family. After 18 hours and 850 miles on pre-superhighway roads, he would roll his dusty Plymouth onto the gravel of my grandparents’ farm and step out with the most heartfelt smile I ever saw. He would tell my grandmother he could smell her cinnamon sticky buns when they crossed into Pennsylvania and he would assure my grandfather that he had not forgotten his tools so they could get to that long-put-off chore. I remember this as if it were yesterday. I was a city kid on summer vacation in the country. After a cup of coffee, Uncle Chuck would ask that enchanted question: “So, Michael, what adventure do you have in mind?” And then, in less than an hour, 12 cousins, neighbors, and friends between the ages of 5 and 14, would pile into Uncle Chuck’s car. Over several summers

before I entered high school, we explored Philadelphia, a coal mine, the Scranton train yards, and a section of the Appalachian Trail, and we went on day-long canoe rides and hikes throughout Rickett's Glen State Park. From the tone of Aunt Josephine's voice, I do not believe that this was how she envisioned her vacations. Nevertheless, after a puckish wink and a kiss on his wife's cheek, Uncle Chuck would share all he knew about the place we were going and, with a surprise picnic basket, a piggy-back ride, a pack of chewing gum, a bottle of pop, or the loan of his engineer's cap, he would ensure each of us had a great time. No one was left behind, and no one ever fell behind. Uncle Chuck radiated hope.

At a recent family reunion, Uncle Chuck was feted as the oldest member of our family. My cousins and I told captivating stories about those summers from long ago. I remain in awe that we all continue our uncle's tradition of adventures with our families and friends. Moreover, his mentoring in life skills, outdoorsmanship, love of history, and getting-where-you-want-to-go influenced us in becoming leaders in education, medicine, business, and law. As I reflect on my life's path, I recognize how Uncle Chuck's focus on service to others first contributed to my growth as a servant leader. After Aunt Josephine died, Uncle Chuck became more involved in his church and eventually attained the status of Deacon. He continues to effortlessly and cheerily minister to an extended, ever-growing family. Not long ago, Uncle Chuck hugged me and said: "Relationships are the perfect way to give and I am amazed that I have MORE because I give."

**A Social Justice Leader.** Social justice is about breaking down barriers. Philosophers and theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Marx, Rawls, Freire, Sergioivanni, Dantley and Tillman, and Shields concern themselves with discussions of

social imbalances, inequality, dehumanization, oppression, and discrimination. Regarding barriers in classrooms, the injustices of right-of-education, achievement gaps, academic tracking or exclusion, unequal allocation of resources, cultural chasms, and a disproportionate focus on the at-risk behaviors of minority children require school leaders to investigate underlying causes and imagine leadership that successfully influences equitable, inclusive, and democratic experiences for every student (Brown, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Shields, 2004). School leaders are in the position to garner strong stakeholder support for public education and to provide learning opportunities for all, despite the children's previous experiences. Further, leaders must develop schools and organizations where individuals – students as well as educators – feel safe, supported, and free to think and act creatively. A challenge for leaders is to move from a bureaucratic system of managing people to an autonomous system marked by shared problem-solving and decision-making. Social justice leaders champion a “discourse of interdependence, an ethic of otherness, and a politics of recognition” (Gerwitz, 1998, p. 477). Through scrutiny of academic attainment and inclusive practices, a social justice leader fortifies his practice with a regard for relationships, democracy, and empowerment realized only through concern for the achievement potential of all students (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, Gonzalez, Cambron-McCabe, & Scheurich, 2008; North, 2006) and for the instructional potential of all teachers.

Social justice leadership generates a democratic community – through reflection and actions – that is rooted in both change struggles and day-to-day critical practices. There is a consciousness of the broader social, cultural, and political contexts of schools, with a determination to move from rhetoric to civil rights activism and with a moral



obligation to voice a narrative of hope regarding education (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). And, when a power imbalance ensues, those educational stakeholders need to discuss ethics and morals (Sergiovanni, 1992), so that all services and resources are equally distributed, unless an equal dispersal is to the detriment of the less favored (Rawls, 1971). Moreover, the disposition of the social justice leader must awaken global curiosity, strong dialogic relationships, a public consciousness and intellect, and a transformative approach to leadership (Shields, 2010). Unmistakably, the educational leader “must be committed to participating in the generation and production of a socially just society, rather than the generation and reproduction of an unjust society that blames children and their families for situations that place them at risk and that is unaccepting of difference” (Dantley & Tillman, 2010, p. 27). As I stated earlier, schools need to stop blaming the student for failing grades and poor achievement outcomes, and instead evolve instructional practices so that teachers proficiently know how to do what they are being asked to do.

Public schools need to do more than just acknowledge their diverse populations and advertise their multicultural competence. With diversity being as much an opportunity as it is a challenge, I employ my leadership skills to help students from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, and language groups to experience academic success. In promoting inclusive teaching and learning practices, I nourish an inclusive school climate and culture, and build connections between schools and communities. Further, the professional development I offer to teachers and other educational leaders cultivates self-reflection, emotional intelligence, empathy, communication and sharing, critical thinking, and pedagogical expertise. Yet, knowledge and skills – in those teachers and, ultimately, in the students – are not sufficient to guarantee full, active engagement in the learning

community or in our society. We all must develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact positively with people from diverse groups and to participate meaningfully in a civic life. Further, I accept Freire's (2000) emphasis on the value of human development and on the right to personal and collective self-determinism. For me, I pursue becoming more fully human and in aiding others to accomplish the same.

***Influencing Humanness.*** For a clinical internship to satisfy the requirements of a master's degree in clinical psychology, I volunteered several hours a week in a small family services health clinic, in a suburb near New York City, during the mid-1980s. "Dr." Valencia was the lead social worker. Though she had not officially attained this title, she wielded it like a weapon of status and authority, on behalf of the clients, the clinic, and members of the community, when dealing with government agencies and bureaucrats. She would arrogantly boast: "It gets done because I MAKE SURE it gets done RIGHT." I always felt dwarfed by her five-foot, one-inch stature. Despite her impoverished upbringing in Puerto Rico, Dr. Valencia took jobs earlier in her career as a cook in a shelter, a teacher's aide, a receptionist in a law firm, a hospice worker, and a job coach for severely disabled teens. Her husband was killed in the Easter Offensive, in Vietnam, and she raised their two daughters, in the company of no fewer than 15, ever-changing, ever-welcome faces around their dinner table. However, none of these experiences prepared Dr. Valencia for the impact that HIV would have on her community and on society, in general. Exclusion and oppression by race, class, gender, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and any other marginalizing condition were her enemy. However, the AIDS epidemic created a new adversary; one that heightened rejection of homosexual men and an unprecedented fear of the disease's transmission and conclusion.

I kept in touch with Dr. Valencia over the next ten years as she worked tirelessly to advocate for all those in her community, but never as much as she did for those effected by HIV. She confronted medical leaders who discouraged her direct contact with patients, religious leaders who disapproved of her condom-distribution program, managers who were not condemned for dismissing an AIDS-suspected employee, and school principals who refused sexual awareness programs in the classrooms. At times, her passion and her doggedness created more snags and slamming doors than the red-tape she found so comforting around her. Dr. Valencia's leadership continues to inspire me. She was brave, not heroic; self-giving, not martyred; and barrier-breaking, not groundbreaking. Her brand of social justice incited discomfort when she asked challenging questions, posed why-not solutions, and threatened people to treat each other more compassionately. She strived for a better world. Her daughter told me she died in her sleep one night. Whenever I think of Dr. Valencia, I can hear her singing to her favorite Bob Marley record: "Let's get together to fight this Holy Armageddon (One love)/So when the Man comes there will be no, no doom (One song)/Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner/There ain't no hiding place from the Father of Creation."

**A Democratic Leader.** The democratic leader respects individuality, ensures that all voices are heard, and listens attentively to the ideas and opinions of others. Through emphasis on equal and constructive participation, inclusiveness, self-determination, distributed responsibility, and deliberation (Dahl, 1989; Fishkin, 1991), the classic definition of democratic leadership invokes a reliance upon active member involvement, group decision-making, honest praise and criticism, and partnerships (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Members have the ability to shape the culture, the

organization, and the relationships of which they are a part (Woods, 2004). For this to happen, leadership must safeguard that people can communicate effectively with one another and that all are included in the decisions that affect them. Optimal communication practices promote connections, empathies, and understandings across differences, so that people can achieve better together to shape the organization in which they live and work (Burbules, 1993; Young, 2000). Further, in eschewing the “development of hierarchies in which special privilege and status differentials dominate” (Krech, Crutchfield, & Ballanchey, 1962, p. 435), the democratic leader dynamically contributes to members developing a greater sense of trust in themselves and others (Lassey, 1971), attaining the confidence that all are potential leaders (Tead, 1935), experiencing a warm, nonjudgmental setting (Maier, 1952), and sharing a public voice or the solution that best represents the organization’s collective interests (Busch, 1934).

In compact understatement, communication presents many challenges for members of wide-ranging school communities. From my experiences, educational stakeholders – from the teacher to the parent, from the student to the board member, and from the community member to the principal – often struggle to understand others who perceive, learn, question, comprehend, and act in different ways or, for that matter, in different languages. Differences in how diverse students learn and how diverse teachers teach undoubtedly complicate how we answer: (a) What do we want students to learn? (b) How do we know they learned it? (c) How will we respond when learning does not take place? and (d) What do we do for those who already know it? As a school administrator, I recognize the added challenges of entrenched hierarchies, time-honored but outdated practices, biases and prejudices, attitudes and apathies, and hesitancy for

growth and change and, importantly, I remind myself that the original purpose of education was to ensure the full and informed participation of all citizens in a democratic process (Dewey, 1916/1966). My democratic leadership espouses shared activities among equals. I celebrate diversity and intensify social justice and equality, in order to improve the quality of life for everyone. Through my reflective practice and conscious action, I accept that a democratic dialogue between people of opposing views brings new knowledge to the relationship (Freire, 1998). Moreover, in the schools where I work, I recognize how these courageous conversations produce democratically-wise, professional judgments and create opportunities for stakeholder to share, understand, cooperate, and achieve.

***Influencing Sharing.*** Tenth grade represented my third school in as many years; from eighth grade in a parochial school to a last year of a public school junior high to the first year of senior high school. Although I enjoyed reading and found inspiration in music, poetry, and fictional and factual works, my language arts literacy skills, particularly reading comprehension, were lacking; and I found myself in a heterogeneous English class of struggling readers. Mr. Barrett was our teacher. Non-tenured and only recently out of college, he did not present that way. He spoke decisively and articulately, and when he dramatically stroked his beard, looking through narrowed eyes, he seemed to be conjuring the words from the depths of his soul. From the first day to the last, my classmates and I were equals in Mr. Barrett’s classroom. He addressed each of us as if our first name was “mister” (or “miss” or, when searching, “missss.....der”). There was little of the hooligan antics and misbehaviors here as I experienced in other rooms. This was not because he shouted, bullied, threatened to send you to the principal’s office, or

dispensed punishments; he did not. He purposively employed his voice and his movements to great effect. The rules applied to everyone, including him. In addition, there was no advanced group or low group, no jocks or nerds, and no poor kids or rich kids. By November of that year, Mr. Barrett had banished the social hierarchy, the stereotypes, and the class ranks from his room. Before long, we were talking with each other, about short stories, about instruction, about how we could demonstrate what we learned, about things affecting us in the real world, about literature that did not appear on the course syllabus, and about our hopes, our fears, our plans, and our lives. We conversed with each other and we shared. By April, we were deciding by consensus – not majority rule – which novel would best prepare us to attain Mr. Barrett’s 4<sup>th</sup> marking period objective. We selected *Lord of the Flies*.

There are many expressions I recall Mr. Barrett voicing; my favorite is: “Life is better because you know more, not because you have more.” He liberated us for 42 minutes a day. He freed our minds and our hearts. He taught us to think about thinking, and to ask why, to answer why-not, and to suggest something smarter. He helped us become a community and then he reminded us of our power as individuals. Mr. Barrett shaped learning, the culture, and the relationships of which I was a part of in his classroom. He honored diversity and the pursuit of ethical ideals, such as self-determination, personal development, and democratic decision-making. I acknowledge Mr. Barrett for influencing in me democratic leadership.

**A Transformational Leader.** Exceptional and dedicated leaders possess unique personal values that inspire, empower, support, and reassure others to transform the organization. Moreover, the focus on the development of those individuals within the

organization emphasizes the comprehensive emotional, intellectual, and moral engagement of all to enhance their present skills and, ultimately, to exceed expectations and attain their full potential (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Sergiovanni, 1991; Tichy & Devanna, 1986). The transformational leader accomplishes this, in part, by exhibiting ethical and moral conduct, with charismatic flare, arousing a team's spirit through optimism and enthusiasm, stimulating creativity and challenging the status quo, and offering personal attention to all in a supportive climate. Further, Burns (1978) and later Bass (1985; 1998), drawing on Kohlberg's (1973) theory, contend that the transformational leader must be morally uplifting in order to compel those in the organization to transcend their self-interests for the sake of the organization. In addition, the leader motivates members in such a way that their primary human want (i.e., organizational purpose) is to satisfy the higher self-actualization needs of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy. In aligning members' self-interests in their own development with the interests of the team or organization, the transformational leader expands the need portfolios (Bass, 1985) of those in the organization by raising them. This is critical because, in theory, the lower needs are more fundamental, and individuals are prone to abandon any upward ambitions if the lower needs are not being sufficiently met. In essence, the transformational leader draws-out the motivation of the person in a way that satisfies the higher order need of self-actualization (Dvir, Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002).

Within the field of educational administration, the conceptual model put forth by Leithwood and his colleagues (e.g., Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) has been instrumental in bridging the work of Burns and Bass. In reviewing the extensive empirical studies that contribute significantly to my

understanding of how leadership affects the school environment, I am sensitive to how I set directions (e.g., build school vision, establish goals, and demonstrate high performance expectations), develop staff (e.g., offer individualized support and model best practices and important school values), and redesign the school (e.g., create a productive culture and develop structures to foster distributed leadership and participation in decision-making) (Leithwood, 1994). Moreover, as my transformational leadership is informed by democratic, social justice, and servant leader influences, I recognize how I share leadership in a reciprocal process with my staff and notice that, rather than controlling others, I provide vision, energy, passion, information and resources, nutritional sustenance (e.g., food and drink!), hope, support and cheerleading, stories and ideas, fairness, and a very ethical, moral, and human presence.

*Influencing Vision and Progress.* Throughout my childhood, I recall working alongside the adults in my life and being encouraged to be helpful and productive. My work ethic was nurtured by my apprenticeship-like relationships with bakers, bankers, carpenters, cashiers, teachers, truckers, painters, plumbers, masons, mechanics, farmers, and physicians. My grandfather, who lived through the Great Depression, would remind me that if I knew how to do many things, I would never be want for a paying job. (But, he made me promise that I would never become a coal miner as he had been.) And, my résumé is lengthy. During breaks from college, I was employed by a construction company and I did whatever the job required. My foreman was Steve Jones and he was a master carpenter and part-owner of the company, and memorably inimitable. He revered Frank Lloyd Wright, Miles Davis, and Oscar Wilde. He wore a pressed shirt and bow-tie each day with his jeans and steel-toed work boots. Over lunch, he would talk about



construction practices in Tokyo, comment on an article he read in the Wall Street Journal, or warble a few lines from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. As a hiring practice, he formally interviewed applicants and required a high school diploma and a writing sample as well as a basic proficiency with reading and math skills. Steve Jones once told me that the problem with America is that we “lower the expectation bar on everything and then wonder why we trip over it to settle for [crap].” He demanded exceptional workmanship from his craftsmen, from his assistants, and from himself. He could perform any job he expected from his workers. The contract was everything and his reputation needed to be above reproach. People wanted to be on his crew; some actually went back to school or took classes on the side. As long as you met the company’s standards, Steve Jones could overlook any character flaws or social tribulations you might possess. Every summer, he hosted a 4<sup>th</sup> of July party at his shore house, with incomparable food, beverages, and entertainment. More importantly, he used that opportunity to brainstorm with partners, stakeholders, and workers; to discuss future projects; to sign workers up for training programs; to demonstrate new construction products and techniques; and to rethink strategic goals aligned with the company’s vision.

Steve Jones was charismatic and empowering. In retrospect, he impresses me as a transformational leader. Leading by example, he provided values, a sense of purpose, meaning, and confidence in himself and others; he excelled in communicating, as well as in challenging, encouraging, and working with his employees; he stressed creativity, thinking, decision-making, and engagement; and he used an honest, open approach to show encouragement, a caring for, and a coaching of those who worked for him. Yet, the primary objective was always the success of the company. I recall the interchange Steve

Jones would routinely have with a new client. Prior to the start of construction, he would identify three conditions available for the project: (a) He could make it of high quality, (b) he could make it inexpensively, and (c) he could make it quickly. The proviso? the client could choose only two for any given project. For example, if the first two were selected, it might take several months; or, if the first and last were selected, the price would be significantly higher. Steve Jones ensured buy-in, empowerment, engagement, conformance, and performance on so many different levels. It was always a toss-up at the end of one of these give-and-takes whose smile was bigger: his, the client's, or mine.

### **Starting a Fire and Unfreezing a System**

In the previous section, I highlight the recurrent people-oriented and service-directed themes which emerge from the overlapping of the transformational, servant, social justice, and democratic leadership styles in my platform. With a framework of caring, influence, vision, hope, respect or credibility, communicating, risk-sharing or delegation, integrity, and trust, I emphasize the importance of appreciating and valuing people, listening, mentoring or coaching, and empowering those who are employed in the schools of my district. Through my implementation of this study and my overarching commitment to completing the Educational Leadership Doctorate program at Rowan University, I am transforming me. Equally so, my leadership and my efforts within the Echgan Palaber School District are promoting organizational movement. Yet, these changes are not stress-free.

Change, as a profound psychological dynamic process, often involves painful unlearning and difficult relearning. I have found the elegant simplicity of Lewin's (1947) three-step change model to be an influential conceptual guide to understanding the

process of transforming behaviors. In the first step, some significant unfreezing of the existing situation must occur. The image of a fire, or a crisis, comes to mind. Here, a tipping in the balance between the-what-has-been-done and the-what-could-be-done, for example, provokes individuals, groups, and organizations to overcome inertia, dismantle existing paradigms and mind sets, attack complacency and self-righteousness, and bypass restraining defense mechanisms. Informed, active participation by involved members is the most critical element; and, with visionary leadership, teamwork, and communication, confusion, hesitancy, and inhibitions give way to movement and momentum. In this moving step, transition is marked by the appraisal of the existing behaviors or activities and the development and implementation of a new system. The final or (re)freezing step of Lewin's model results in equilibrium in the required changes to the organizational culture, norms, policies, and practices. Success warrants a commitment on the individuals, group, or organization to remain actively involved until the new behaviors have replaced the former. And, this does not happen overnight or without the enduring support of those involved and affected.

I introduce Lewin at this point in my study because his writings serve as a starting point for my discussions on change theory, leadership styles (e.g., social justice, democratic), group dynamics, social psychology, and action research. With his strong moral and ethical beliefs and emphasis on democratic values and institutions in society, he argues, for example, that discrimination is a problem of management in which the actions of the privileged, the entitled, the gatekeepers determine what gets accomplished and what does not, who benefits and who does not, and why some people are oppressed and others are not (Lewin, 1948). Although Lewin's pioneering work dominated the

theory and practice for over 40 years, during the later decades of the twentieth century, some critics (e.g., Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992) challenge his writings on the grounds that they ignore issues or that his model could only be applied to small-scale changes in stable conditions. However, there has been recent renewed interest in understanding and applying Lewin's approach to change (e.g., Burnes, 2004a; 2004b; Schein, 1996). In my investigations of the literature, I find acknowledgments and references made to him by Argyris (1990; 2008a; 2008b), Blanchard (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 2007), Schein (2004), Senge (2006) and other writers and researchers who influence me and this study.

**Recognizing an Immunity to Change.** This chapter investigates the type of leader I think I am and the one I want to become. In taking my own Lewinian steps, I showcase my core values and beliefs, set fire to hoary mind sets and personal stories, record the melting away of prevailing paradigms and behaviors, measure the movement of my theory-in-use toward my espoused theory, and then celebrate the crystallization of my leadership. In my understanding of transformational change, I begin with the premise that an individual interprets and gives relevance to his experiences through a complex meaning-making system (Kegan, 1977) that guides, in a variety of ways, his perceptions, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions. Further, this dynamic interplay between what occurs inside the individual and what is happening on the outside (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Dewey, 1938) makes for great developmental reflection and conversation. Philosophers, educators, and psychologists have referred to this meaning-making system as an idiosyncratic template that a person fashions over his realities (Kelly, 1955), a wonted set of expectations that serve as an orienting frame of reference and a belief system that a person employs to interpret the meaning of his experiences (Mezirow,

1991), and our vision (Kegan, 1977), “not a lens or a monocle dangling on a metaphysical string around our necks, which we sometimes look through and sometimes not” (p. 398). Yet, hidden assumptions, often grounded in fear, can distort the person’s comprehension of their daily undertakings (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Kegan, 1982) and create obstacles that protect or prevent him from making progress toward his goals and commitments (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). According to Kegan and Lahey, if I want a more adequate understanding of my prospect for change, I first need a better way to examine and interrupt my powerful inclination not to change; that is, my immunity to change.

After reading Kegan and Lahey’s work (2009), I made the personal connection and acknowledgment that my overcoming resistance and obstacles to change, through self-reflection and reflective practices, transform my ability to effectively implement lasting change. I knew that I would have to weave their four-column exercise into my research study (see Appendix M). Moreover, in light of the scarcity of published empirical research addressing immunity-to-change interventions and potential (Howell, 2006), I briefly considered a more comprehensive investigation. For the action and methodology of that imagined study, I would work with the 11 principals within my school district in order to uncover the subconscious constraints that hinder their change efforts. By applying the four-column interactive exercise (Kegan & Lahey, 2001) rooted in each leader’s personal experiences and in the properties of the group, the administrative team, working multilaterally as a group, would develop awareness and reflectivity on their initiatives or lack thereof. Further, through a consensus-building process, incorporating the group’s vision and values, I planned that the educational leaders would equally, by intent, put as much effort into doing things the right way and

eventually attaining a collective level of skill. By eliciting the contradictions between the leaders' self-generated commitments and their hidden fears and assumptions, this exercise would attend to the nuances of meaning-making change and lead to profound transformation in their leadership behaviors. Though that larger research design will be considered at a later time, I will – in later chapters of this study – return to my endeavors with the four-column interactive exercise.

### **Trust – Benevolence, Honesty, Openness, Reliability, Competence**

As I reflect on who I am as a leader, where I come from, and where I am headed, I am aware that my personal story – with components of reason and emotion – is more like a road and less like a monument. On this adventure, I want the educational stakeholders in my district to recognize that how we have done things in the past may or may not be serving all of our 21<sup>st</sup> century students, or our mission for teaching, as well as the need demands. I want them to follow my lead as a life-long learner and a leader among leaders. As a transformational leader, I build conformance, performance, and commitment to my organization's objectives. As a democratic leader, I encourage teamwork and collective efforts that embrace diverse school communities and ensure communication across cultures, practices, and languages. As a social justice leader, I recognize discrimination and work toward inclusion and equity. And, as a servant leader, I assist all in further growing as persons; in becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant-leaders; and in improving the quality of learning and living for all, including the least privileged in society. Moreover, I acknowledge the power of trust and the themes of benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) emerging in my leadership.

In Chapter 3, I continue to intertwine the predominant themes of change, trust, stories, voice, growth, and collaboration related to teacher professional development, its connection to teacher effectiveness and student learning, and the work of schools in becoming learning communities. In critically exposing the traditional functioning of school-based problem-solving teams, I advocate for the paradigm shift from referral mechanism (to special education) to assistance realization (for the general education teacher). The changing role of a teacher to teacher-leader, and how this transformation is supported by school leadership and through scholarship, has strong implications about my own professional journey.

## Chapter 3

### Literature Review

If you want truly to understand something, try to change it.  
(Lewin, as cited in Edmondson, 1996, p. 588)

To do what is right and best for all students and that includes implementing preventative and remedial programs for struggling learners, the educational community must first empower, affirm, and assist teachers. The continuous development and renewal of educational practices must be the primary focus for school reform and improvement. While most teachers have experienced frustration during imposed professional development in-services as well as discontent with mandatory execution of dubious district initiatives, these are neither the “somewhere” nor the potential to “later go further more easily” that Bruner (1977, p. 17) imagined for learning. Critically, educational change efforts must build learning communities to aid teachers to become action researchers of their own practice and build caring communities to encourage these educators to reflect, converse, problem-solve, and plan (Sergiovanni, 1996). Grappling with their own assumptions balanced against different perspectives, philosophies, and circumstances, teachers are greatly influenced by what they believe, by what colleagues believe and do, and by other less understood cultural dynamics. In this transformational climate of shared responsibility, mutual respect, mentoring and coaching, and collaborative learning, a resulting interdependency stimulates a sense of personal and group identity (Brown, 1994). Further, if teachers are to meaningfully participate in cultural change to advance student achievement, they must believe that they – and their services – are valued and that their voices are heard.



Within professional communities designed with reflective discussions about instruction and a sense of collective responsibility for student achievement, the resulting interactions enable educators to assume the informative and supportive roles of mentor, advisor, coach, specialist, facilitator, and partner. Cultivation of teachers' influence over and participation in school-wide decisions has the potential to significantly and constructively influence school improvement (Leithwood & Beatty, 2007). Further, through shared leadership, there may occur not only reduction in teacher isolation and escalation in commitment to the school's mission (Pounder, 1999), but also a focus on communal practices and goals (Marks & Printy, 2003) and revival in instructional innovations (Harris, 2008; Printy & Marks, 2006). The functioning of such collaborative problem-solving communities or teams within a district serves to empower educators to focus on outcomes for students who have learning challenges (Bahr & Kovaleski, 2006). Moreover, Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom (2010) provide empirical support for the view that instructional leadership, staff perceptions of shared leadership, teachers' trust in the school leader, and the engaged professional community will enhance classroom practice that will in turn improve student learning.

The Programs to Support Student Development chapter of the New Jersey

Administrative Code (N.J.A.C., 2007) mandates that:

District boards of education shall establish and implement a coordinated system in each school building for the planning and delivery of intervention and referral services that are designated to assist students who are experiencing learning, behavior or health difficulties and to assist staff who have difficulties in addressing students' learning, behavior or health needs (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8.1[a] p. 102).

As a service to be delivered "prior to referring a student for an evaluation of eligibility for special education and related services" (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3-3[b], p. 45), this pre-referral

instruction model can be highly effective in providing research-based strategies in general education classrooms to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties, as well as those at risk of school failure (Kovaleski, 2008). A school-based intervention and referral services (I&RS) team relies on the expertise, the collaboration, and organization of the individual team members. Further, Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) assert that strong leadership which acknowledges teacher professionalism, capitalizes on teacher knowledge, and recognizes teachers as equals in the intervention process transforms a school culture through a blend of situational and shared leaderships.

To educate children well and to design schools where improvement becomes a life-long journey (not a destination, a standardized score, or a diploma), educational stakeholders need to build learning communities where individuals continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models (Senge, 2006). These deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, and images influence how we understand the world and how we take action and effect change. Further, in situations where educators may be short on strategy, resources, an innovative teaching approach, confidence, or patience to enable them to succeed with the student before them, Senge reminds us that real learning gets to the heart of what it is to be human. In “being part of a truly great team,” teachers become “part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative” (p. 13). In this chapter, I will next present the historical context and rationale for the use of problem-solving teams in public schools, as well as the introduction and status of New Jersey’s Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model.

## **Responding to the Diverse Educational Needs of Students**

The educational community has long discussed ways to best educate children so that they are career- or college-ready and prepared to lead a successful life upon graduation from high school. And, ensuring that every classroom is led by an effective teacher has become the foremost education policy goal in the United States. However, there are many students today who struggle academically and there are many teachers who feel helpless in knowing how to positively influence this readiness and success with those students today. With intervention earlier in the child's schooling rather than when failure is inevitable, achievement gaps and behavior issues can be addressed proactively and efficiently. Although there are still debates about what types of teaching are most efficacious in maximizing student learning (e.g., Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003), instruction and classroom environments are recognized to have the greatest impact on student learning. Nonetheless, the specific design of those settings and the measurement of the accompanying instruction are very complicated.

Due largely to the fact that teachers and students are independent and idiosyncratic participants in any study, a particular obstacle is that the most valuable research strategies for observing instruction in varying grade levels and different disciplines frequently lack the details to guide educators in making choices for their own classrooms (e.g., Newmann & Associates, 1996). Activities that happen in a given situation are context-specific and make generalizations about reform efforts (e.g., the impact of an intervention or the role of shared leadership or professional learning communities) difficult to confirm. Further still, this incomplete picture is obscured by the

limited amount of research that directly links teachers' behaviors and high quality instruction in the classroom to policies and practices of administrators at the school level.

Importantly, volumes of research validate that good teaching matters more for student outcomes than any other school-based factor (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000; Sanders, Saxton, & Horn, 1997). Yet, how does an educator acquire good teaching skills? Principals and personnel administrators often pursue teacher applicants with pedigree licensure and credentials, advanced academic degrees, and extensive classroom experiences. These paths may be misleading; and, frequently, there may be no correlation with student achievement. Personally, I have known engaging and inspired educators who seem to effortlessly decipher the learning milieu, the students, and resulting responses, and then spontaneously evolve to a didactic style complementing the situation. To my query, these professionals answer: "It's what I do!" In pursuit of simple, quantifiable attributes, researchers find that good teaching may be related to a teacher's warmth, empathy, and non-directivity (Cornelius-White, 2007); verbal and cognitive abilities, as measured by ACT scores (Ferguson & Ladd, 1996); subject matter knowledge "only up to a certain point, beyond which it does not seem to have an impact" (Rice, 2003, p. 37); strong pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., how to teach) (Baumert, Kunter, Blum, Brunner, Voss, Jordan, et al, 2010) and a diverse repertoire of techniques; belief that all students can learn (e.g., the Pygmalion Effect) (Hattie, 2009); and belief in his/her own ability and efficacy as a teacher to help students succeed (Armor, Conroy-Oseguera, Cox, King, McDonnell, Pascal, et al., 1976). These teachers and these abilities exist in our schools. As leaders we must recognize, appreciate, and nurture such talents.

Evidence continues to support the fact that teachers learn best from one another and that shared knowledge is more valuable when delivered by staff in their own school (Rosenholtz, 1991). Further, instruction improves when teachers, in teams, “teach each other the practice of teaching” (Little, 1990, p. 509). Within these professional learning communities, the accomplishments and expertise of the educators can inspire and lead to heightened successes that no outsider could introduce. Staff realize that striving to make constructive effort requires teamwork and that involved members not only contribute a richer pool of ideas but also social commitment and energy. For the organization’s growth, Fullan (2007) emphasizes that this is a “learning experience for the adults involved (teachers, administrators, parents, etc.) as well as for the children” (p. 85).

Unmistakably, in understanding this dynamic, professionalism itself is the focus:

When teachers recognize that knowledge for improvement is something they can generate, rather than something that must be handed to them by so-called experts, they are on a new professional trajectory. They are on the way to building a true profession of teaching, a profession in which members take responsibility for steady and lasting improvement. They are building a new culture of teaching. (Hiebert & Stigler, 2004, p. 14)

So, for any comprehensive strategy to serve challenged learners, an essential component is the improvement of the classroom to meet diverse needs; one student at a time and one teacher – one professional learning community – at a time. This is the goal.

In assisting that educator to understand how a struggling student learns best, the pre-referral instruction process has the potential to generate meaningful and potent teaching strategies for use within the general education milieu. I am not alone in asserting that it is reprehensible for students to be “misdiagnosed as disabled and ... placed in special education programs they do not need” (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2001, p. 9). Nevertheless, the implementation of pre-referral instructional

strategies is not intended to deny a child special education services or discourage teachers from referring students for special education. Once a student falls significantly behind classmates for any reason in the general education setting, neither supplementary aides and services in that classroom nor remedial education or special education are likely to bring the child up to age-appropriate achievement norms. From an organizational perspective, the low achievement of the academically compromised child puts a strain on the school (and the student) that is likely to last throughout that student's career.

**Exceptions to the Rule.** The letter of the law – that is, Public Law 94-142 – demands that all children be educated; no exceptions. While this study is purposely designed to minimize its intrusion into special education, I find it essential to provide some rapt commentary on exceptional children and the background problem (Horn, 1924/2011) of special education. Individual differences in how children learn the skills that society agrees should be taught in school necessitate the existence of special education. As a civil rights issue, as social policy, as a cultural diversity matter, or as a business that deals with students who are exceptions to the rule, special education occurs in the discrepancies between the performance of the individual and the performance of the majority (i.e., the average). Acutely, this exceptionality may be manifest in abilities that are superior or inferior to the typical child. Although instructional techniques, attitudes toward disabilities, and laws governing how exceptional individuals are treated will always be evolving, the problem of special education (i.e., how to deal with profound student differences in our schools) has been and will remain constant. When special education became a location in the school (initially in the basement, but always distinct from the general population) rather than the keen application of extraordinary

pedagogical techniques, education of *those students* become someone else's chore. As the practice of special education is highly dependent on conditions present in general education, exceptional teaching must be ensured in the general education environment.

Regarding the abilities and needs of severely disabled (i.e., physically, emotionally, cognitively, developmentally, and behaviorally) individuals, special education services and programs, with an emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and implementation in the least restrictive environment, will always be an essential component of our educational system. However, rather than becoming an end-point for children, special education must remain – as originally intended – an access to more effective instruction. In facilitating consultation with classroom teachers on such issues as accommodations, modifications, resources, learning styles, and adapting interventions, as well as on improving classroom management and evaluating students, special education specialists and consultants might include, among their responsibilities and unique abilities, working with individual children for brief periods and then returning them to their teachers, tutors, related services providers, caregivers, and employers.

***A Brief History of Special Education in New Jersey.*** By an act of legislature in 1911, New Jersey was the first state to mandate special education classes in its public schools for students identified as deaf, blind, or mentally retarded. Programs for these challenged learners were initially started in Newark, Trenton, and Jersey City; and, by 1953, nearly 9,000 students were being taught by 726 teachers in special classes or through individualized instruction (Molenaar & Luciano, 2007). In 1954, the Beadleston Act and the Grossi Act extended special education for the un-served or under-served school-aged children with physical disabilities, cognitive impairments, emotional

disturbances, or social maladjustments, and provided state aid for those services. These Acts required school districts to employ child study teams (i.e., school psychologists, social workers, learning specialists) and to provide appropriate special education programs either alone or in conjunction with other public or private schools.

The 1963 Commission to study the effectiveness of the Beadleston and Grossi Acts recommended that (a) every student be entitled to instruction appropriate to their needs as assessed by qualified specialists and prescribed in a comprehensive plan; (b) New Jersey be responsible to identify, prevent, and rehabilitate the adverse effects of learning disabilities; (c) a student with disabilities be offered the most suitable special education services, instructed by qualified teachers who are supervised by staff trained and experienced in teaching the disabled in suitably equipped facilities; and (d) the NJ Department of Education provide leadership and consultation, set standards, approve programs, and enforce laws for local Boards of Education to ensure the legal, moral, and financial responsibility that every child is receiving an appropriate education.

By 1975, New Jersey's special education regulations served as the model for the first federal legislation, Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later named, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]). After passing Chapter 415, in 1981, New Jersey mandated special education programs and services for children with disabilities from birth through age five. Shortly thereafter, the New Jersey Department of Education collaborated with the State Department of Health to provide early intervention programs for infants and toddlers with disabilities, up to age three years, through contracts with public and private agencies.



In the 1984 Burstein Report to the legislature, four intervention categories based on program need (and not student disability) were recommended to improve special education service delivery in New Jersey: (a) general education programming with intervention, (b) general education programming with related services, (c) part-time special education programming, and (d) full-time special education programming. The report also recommended a study of additional services needed by individuals with disabilities older than 21 and under the age of three years. In addition, child study teams were suggested to be renamed educational support teams, with the expanded functions of evaluation and classification, consulting with and providing direct support for general and special education staff and parents, and all aspects of the development, implementation, and revisions to an individualized education program (IEP). The Burstein Report also called for general education teachers and administrators to facilitate the mainstreaming of students with educational disabilities.

In 1999, New Jersey was cited by the United States Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) for failure to provide monitoring, oversight, and supervision of programs and standards; failure to ensure appropriate placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment; failure to identify noncompliance with the free appropriate public education (FAPE) requirements regarding extended school year and counseling; and failure to ensure the provision of transition services. In response, New Jersey's Office of Special Education Programs developed and successfully implemented a corrective action plan which, during follow-up OSERS investigations, demonstrated notable progress.

Coincidentally, in 1999, the New Jersey Department of Education released its “Resource Manual for Intervention and Referral Services for General Education Pupils” (I&RS), with the expressed purpose of providing “leadership to schools for educational improvement and whole-school reform” (p. 1) with “direction in formulating services and delivery systems to address student problems ... in the general education program” (p. 2).

During fiscal year 2000, the United States spent about \$50 billion on special education services; another \$27.3 billion was expended on regular education services and an additional \$1 billion was paid for other special needs programs (e.g., Title 1, English language learners, and Gifted and Talented Education) for students with disabilities eligible for special education. Thus, total spending to educate over six million students with disabilities found eligible for special education programs amounted to \$78.3 billion (USDOE, 2004). Locally, special education costs for over 230,000 New Jersey students with disabilities (including speech) were above \$3.3 billion per year and were driven by tuition and transportation costs to out-of-district schools, preschool programs for students with autism, related services, and resource programs (Molenaar & Luciano, 2007).

**Education Policy for Instruction and Preventive Practices.** The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in 1997, accentuated the importance of preventive programs for struggling students in general education classrooms (Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005). Previously, early – or pre-referral – instruction and interventions were identified, but were not required by special education legislation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1989). Moreover, while regulations assured a child’s rights to an appropriate evaluation and the development of an individualized education program (IEP), the refer-test-place sequence (Schrag & Henderson, 1996)

proved to be a time-consuming, specialist-intensive, and costly process that routinely resulted in a student being assigned to a special education placement rather than to an effective intervention that would have empowered the student to progress in his own classroom (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). A school's intervention team might have been merely a reconfiguration of child study team members who focused on special education eligibility while never considering the quality of – or the student's response to – instruction up to this point in his educational career (Eidle, Truscott, Meyers, & Boyd, 1998). In acknowledgment of escalating classification rates, IDEA mandated that more effort be made to provide interventions, via enhanced, effective curriculum, in the general educational setting before difficult-to-teach students were even referred to special education (Bangert & Baumberger, 2001; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

With reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004) serving as federal endorsement of state and local aid for special education and related services, the new legislation preserved the basic structure and rights of IDEA yet made important revisions to the special education eligibility process and mandated that students in special education placements be taught by highly qualified teachers (HQT). By incorporating the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act language regarding response to intervention procedures and integrated education policy (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005), IDEIA placed importance on evidence-based practices, evaluations of progress, and data-based decision-making by teachers and school leaders. Furthermore, the combined impact of NCLB and IDEIA required proactive and early intervention from schools for students who were struggling in the general education setting rather than allowing schools to wait until children fall

significantly below grade level before they became eligible for special education services. In addition, IDEIA included provisions for school districts to use grant funds for early intervention services as a means of reducing special education classifications and services for struggling students who did not qualify under the earlier IDEA.

**Problem-solving Teams in a Pre-referral Instruction Process.** As a systematic and collaborative effort to assist general education teachers in understanding and teaching students with different learning abilities and behavioral patterns (Carter & Sugai, 1989), the pre-referral instruction process is intended to be preventative in nature, innovative in educational design, supportive in delivery, limitless in ideas and resources, and unfaltering in commitment. In simple terms, the process involves consultation between a referring teacher and a team of advisors, mentors, specialists, and master teachers. The school's educational leader forms a school-based problem-solving team (SBPST) with professionals who readily demonstrate not only strong knowledge of curriculum and instruction, excellent classroom management skills, varied classroom assessment techniques, and expertise with differentiation and individualization of instruction, but also proficiency in communication, interpersonal skills, organization, and decision-making (Jennings, 2009). With the common goal of effecting change that leads to higher levels of student achievement (Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985; O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003), the SBPST specifies instruction-learning issues or weaknesses in behavioral terms; analyzes, hypothesizes, and recognizes relevant variables; and then, designs, implements, and evaluates an intervention plan (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1989).

Beginning with teacher assistance teams (TATs) in the late 1970s (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979), researchers, state representatives, and local educators established teams to assist teachers in meeting the needs of difficult-to-teach students. In addition to thousands of acronymically-labeled local committees, the past 40 years of research have chronicled the deeds of pre-referral intervention teams (Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985), intervention assistance teams (Graden, 1989), mainstream assistance teams (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990), instructional consultation teams (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996), instructional support teams (Kovaleski, Tucker, & Stevens, 1996), and problem-solving teams (Tilly, 2003). The majority of states and school districts requires some form of pre-referral instruction or intervention team. Survey results suggest that the prevalence for these approaches continues to be on the rise (e.g., Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005). Further, review of the literature highlights these omnipresent teacher-assisting teams in articles and journals (e.g., Bahr, Whitten, Dieker, Kocarek, & Manson, 1999; Nelson, Smith, Taylor, Dodd, & Reavis, 1991; Safran & Safran, 1996; Schrag & Henderson, 1996) and in numerous introductory college texts (e.g., Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012; Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2012).

Rather than as a pre-referral entity, the concept of a school-based problem-solving team (Bahr & Kovaleski, 2006) lessens the notion that the implementation of improvement strategies or preventive practices, within the general education classroom, is some sort of short-term hurdle that must be surmounted before considering a student for special education eligibility. Further, the referring teacher is not alone and will not be simply given instructions that must be interpreted, implemented, and evaluated behind the closed door of the classroom (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990;

Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985; Rosenfield & Gravois, 2006). No; this is a teacher-centric process, during which the teacher seeks out assistance from colleagues and other experts in the educational field; the student is identified by the teacher; the team analyzes the situation, the teaching-learning issues, and the needs; the team recommends an instructional plan to direct instruction and supports for the teacher and for the student; the teacher implements the interventions; and the team conducts a follow-up session with the teacher to determine the effectiveness of the plan and the needs for further modifications. With recognized success, the teacher continues to use the intervention; and the problem-solving team's involvement ends. If a recommended strategy is not fruitful, other interventions may be attempted within the general education classroom by the team. However, if these too prove unsuccessful, a special education referral might be necessary (Kovaleski, 2008). Importantly, within the professional learning community structure, the SBPST process offers an excellent form of job-embedded staff development during which school professionals systematically conduct brainstorming activities.

In broad terms, SBPSTs, regardless of name, can have a positive impact on interventions for students having learning difficulties in general education classrooms by improving student performance (Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005); enhancing the abilities of teachers to educate students who are experiencing difficulties and improve the attitudes of teachers toward such students (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2002; Jennings, 2009; Pugach & Johnson, 1989); delivering effective early intervention to struggling students, specific to level of learning and rate of improvement, before they experience failure (Fuchs & Vaugh, 2003); offering timely and responsive assistance to the struggling student and frustrated staff who are waiting (up to three months) for

completed child study team evaluations (O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003); maximizing the collaboration between general education and special educators to design educational programs for at-risk students (Bay, Bryan, & O'Connor, 2004); and expediting an integration of students with disabilities into the general education environment (Evan, 1990).

In addition, these SBPSTs have demonstrated the ability to reduce inappropriate special education referrals and placements (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Hammond & Ingalls, 1999; Jennings, 2009; Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999; McDougal, Clonan, & Martens, 2000); reduce unnecessary special education testing (Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005); reduce budgeted costs associated with special education, in general, as well as the demand for additional child study team members (Bahr, Whitten, Dieker, Kocarek, & Manson, 1999; Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstron, & Stecker, 1990; Jennings, 2009); reduce the over-identification of students as having disabilities (Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985; Rosenfield & Gravois, 2006); and reduce the unintended but harmful effects that an inappropriate special education label and unwarranted placement, services, and supports have on a student (Harry & Klingler, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002; National Research Council, 2002).

Consequently, the task of drawing conclusions about the overall effectiveness of SBPSTs is difficult and perhaps erroneous. In review of the literature, many studies exploring the impact of the team were conducted by the very researchers who established that particular model. There remains a significant discrepancy between these teams as they are described in research literature and as they operate in most schools. A meta-

analysis conducted by Burns and Symington (2002) identified a small number of qualifying studies of problem-solving teams. These researchers found significant effect sizes for a number of dependent variables, including teacher ratings and observed behavior. A particularly interesting aspect of this study was the greater effect size for university-based initiatives compared with field-based initiatives. This finding speaks to the importance of treatment fidelity in assessing the impact of any team. Given the wide diversity in program features as well as the paucity of studies that are analyzable through meta-analysis, additional research with SBPSTs is warranted.

Most importantly, researchers (e.g., Bahr & Kovalski, 2006; Kovalski & Glew, 2006; Kruger, Struzziero, Watts, & Vacca, 1995) do concur that the single most important factor influencing the success of intervention activities of the SBPSTs is administrative support. In managing critical conditions and context that facilitate the delivery of services to students, effective leaders offer the knowledge and skills required to design, oversee, and sustain effective teams by drawing upon the expertise of appropriate professionals (Jennings, 2009). The team and not the process needs to be the focus. Therefore, it is important for principals, directors of special education, and supervisors to understand, establish, and analyze the tasks ahead as specific to the district's vision and mission, the professional development plan for all instructional and support staff, and the needs and abilities of the students. While evidence suggests that school administrators not be directly involved in the day-to-day operations of the team (Rafoth & Foriska, 2006; Safran & Safran, 1996), Jennings advocates that school leaders need to ensure that (a) members have high task-relevant expertise, (b) members have at least moderate levels of collaborative skills, (c) group size be limited, and (d) group



homogeneity and heterogeneity be adequately balanced. Importantly, and with teams functioning in the schools, leaders must evaluate the relative importance of effort, skill, knowledge, and strategies relative to the team's successful completion of the task.

Research, experience, and discussion with colleagues reveal that most school administrators do not receive any formal training in the management and leadership of SBPSTs. Neither part of their formal pre-service coursework, their in-service training, nor their ongoing professional development, school leaders frequently rely on what's-been-done-before, their past experiences, or the advice of other administrators. Further, this is often the situation for any SBPST member. Not surprisingly, teams who are provided training on intervention assistance or on pre-referral screening for disabilities appear to function more effectively than untrained teams (Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999; Meyers, Valentino, Meyers, Boretti, & Brent, 1996). Further, having the right professionals on the team is important. Evidence suggests that inserting staff – or for that matter, interventions – without considering the setting, scheduling, and orientations of the members of the team frequently results in treatment resistance and a lowering of the acceptability of the process (Elliott, Witt, & Kratochwill, 1991). This resistance may be lessened by empowering members, assisting them in the identification of needs, and developing resources to meet those needs. To foster integrity and efficacy of the program, a sustaining acceptability of any SBPST requires organizational change, ongoing professional development, and instrumental support from principals, supervisors, directors, superintendents, and school board representatives (Piersel & Gutkin, 1983).

**Response to Intervention Models.** Every school should be viewed as an instructional system focused on generating outcomes (e.g., career readiness, language arts literacy, social-emotional competence) deemed important to the community and to society. In light of the nature of learning and the growing diversity of issues and obstacles facing school-aged youth, this is a multifaceted task. Children learn and develop skills at different rates. To attain those desired outcomes, some students may require additional or unique instructional strategies beyond those typically available in the school. Therefore, to meet the needs of all students, educational stakeholders are turning to comprehensive multi-tiered systems of instruction options that can be linked to the specific needs of challenged teachers, of gifted students, and of struggling learners (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Campbell-Whatley, Floyd, O’Farrow, & Smith, 2013; National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2006). Although research on Response to Intervention (RTI) dates back to the 1960s (Bender & Shores, 2007), this proactive three-tiered system (see Figure 2) of instruction and support remains a relatively new or hesitantly realized concept to many school leaders, educators, and parents.

As flexible service delivery systems designed to assist schools focus on helping all children learn by addressing academic and/or behavior issues earlier, employing high quality, evidence-based instruction and interventions, and carefully monitoring student progress (Batsche, Elliot, Graden, Grimes, Kovaleski, Prasse, et al., 2005; McCook, 2009), RTI models need to be introduced into a change-ready, professionally-developed (and trained), and consensus-achieved (i.e., understanding the need, agreeing on the vision) educational system. This necessitates district-wide and school-level infrastructure developments, including policies and procedures, administrative leadership, and an

implementation plan that identifies a unified instructional program, professional development, technical assistance, support services, resources, and an evaluation system.

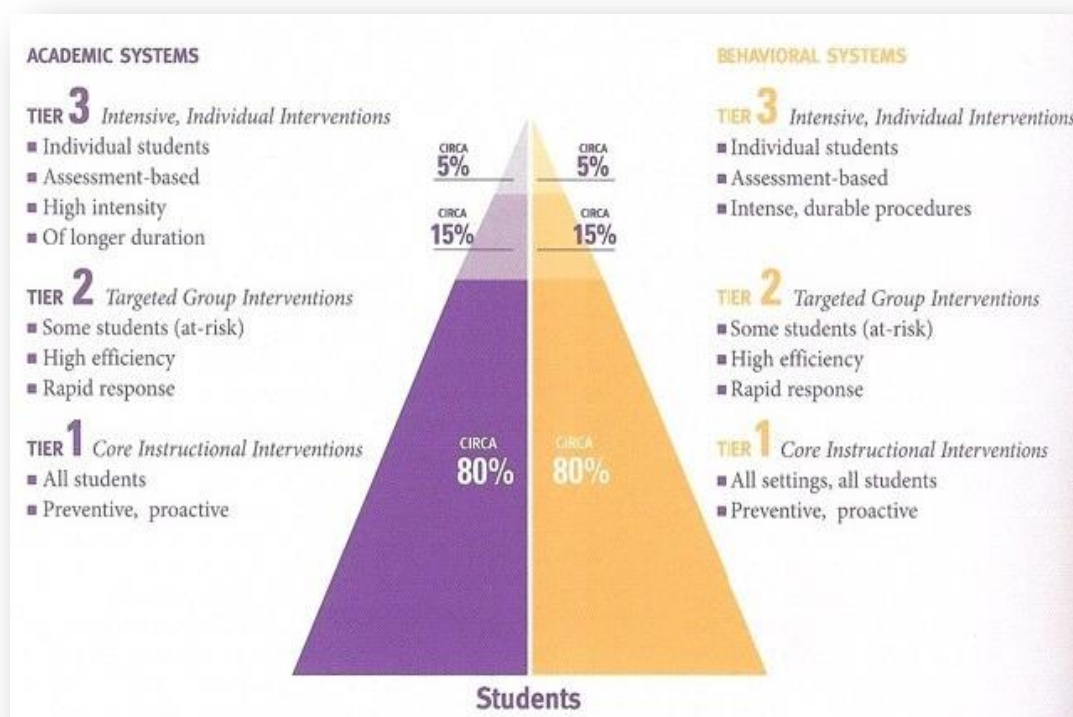


Figure 2. Example of the Three-Tier Model (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005).

A preliminary component of this infrastructure would be adopting and adapting an intervention and referral services (I&RS) framework. The philosophical objective of any RTI model is to provide the “right assistance at the right time” (Pasternack, 2002), with reliability, effectiveness, fidelity, and integrity, and by finding “which children need what services, delivered with how much intensity” (Gresham, VanDerHeyden, & Witt, 2005). Significantly more than a team and arguably not a program, the fundamentals of RTI

emphasize the importance of educational accountability (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007) and equal education opportunity (Brown-Chidsey, 2007).

An RTI system has the potential to create extensive changes in how curricula and instruction are designed and implemented in schools to address the learning needs of all children at all levels of achievement (Clarke, Doabler, Baker, Fien, Jungjohann, & Cary, 2011). RTI offers general education teachers intervention resources and assessment alternatives that encourage them to accept instructional responsibility for a broader range of student abilities (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). A typical RTI model is composed, at a minimum, of the following components: (a) a universal screening tool to determine each student's potential for academic success or their risk of experiencing failure (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009), (b) application of a continuum of scientifically based services of increasing intensity specifically targeted to the needs of individual students (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003), (c) decision points to determine where students are performing relative to their peers in academic (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003) and social behavior domains (Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008), (d) the presentation of good opportunities for students to respond to instruction (Bender & Shores, 2007), (e) continuous monitoring to ensure that student progress is well documented (Gresham, Reschly, Tilly, Fletcher, Burns, Prasse, et al., 2005), (f) implementation of more intensive or alternative strategies when students do not respond to other interventions, and (g) required monitoring of the integrity (or instructional fidelity) of the interventions (Bender & Shores, 2007).

In a common application of an RTI model, a highly skilled multidisciplinary team (e.g., I&RS team; Educational/Instructional Support Team; SBPST) oversees the

screening process, data-collection, and analysis and monitors student progress to determine movement towards more or less rigorous tiers. Critically, classroom teachers receive professional development regarding effective instruction and ways to enhance differentiation and intensity through flexible grouping strategies. The students identified as at-risk are assessed frequently (e.g., every 1 to 4 weeks) to consider progress over time (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). During this first tier (Tier 1; primary, preventive, or proactive), all students within the general education environment, including students at risk, receive a strong core program of high quality, research-based instruction and formative assessment delivered with fidelity (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). Children who do not evidence projected levels of growth, based on local or national benchmarks, receive additional instruction in small groups of three to five students, for 20-40 minutes daily (Tier 2, secondary). This second tier involves short-term, evidence-based interventions in a small-group delivery model, where struggling students and students at risk for lack of academic progress receive differentiated instruction, supplemental instruction, modifications, specialized equipment, or technology to target academic and behavior needs. Intensity, duration, and frequency of instruction are determined by identified student need (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). If the child does not make adequate progress in this secondary intervention, an even more intensive and individualized intervention (Tier 3, tertiary) is provided that may involve smaller groups, increased time in intervention (45-60 minutes), and a more specialized teacher (Campbell-Whatley, Floyd, O’Farrow, & Smith, 2013).

Although the New Jersey Department of Education encourages the use of early and pre-referral instructional services, as well as “utilizing strategies identified through

the *Intervention and Referral Services* program according to N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8, as well as other general education strategies” (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.3[a]3i, p. 44), “A Snapshot of Progress” (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009) failed to capture New Jersey (or Alaska or South Carolina) taking steps toward developing policies or some phase of an RTI model, implementation, or professional development. During the 2007-2008 school year, the New Jersey Department of Education provided basic training in the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model, as well as training for building-based I&RS teams providing basic information, materials, and skills to fulfill the regulatory requirements for the planning, development, implementation, and maintenance of programs of I&RS. From the New Jersey school staff who attended these trainings, Mascari (2008) analyzed survey and interview data. He assessed the degree, quality, and implementation effectiveness of I&RS regulations and then proposed recommendations for changes. While most suggestions sought procedural clarifications and regulatory guidelines, Mascari underscored the participants’ requests for (a) a data-base of what-works instructional programs, interventions, and screening instruments; (b) pre-service college-level certification programs (e.g., teacher, principal, school counselor) to ensure familiarity with I&RS; and (c) ongoing professional development to support I&RS teams to address their gaps in knowledge and skills.

In 1985, Iowa implemented a problem-solving model, through the Heartland Agency, in which school personnel deliver a four-level process of identification and remediation of student difficulties (Ikeda & Gustafson, 2002). In 1990, Pennsylvania introduced their Instructional Support Teams (IST) model in an attempt to bridge special and general education programs by shifting the focus of special education from

categorical services to effective instruction in general education (Conway & Kovalesski, 1998; Kovalesski, Tucker, & Stevens, 1996). Pawlowski (2001) outlined the basic steps: (a) The teacher seeking assistance consults with highly skilled IST members (e.g., reading specialist, school psychologist); (b) at a formal meeting of the IST, the teacher's concerns are behaviorally defined; and (c) the Team develops interventions to be collaboratively implemented by the classroom teacher and the support teacher. As "the best-known statewide pre-referral intervention program in the nation" (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003, p. 162), Pennsylvania's model was then implemented on much smaller scales in Connecticut, Michigan, New York, and Virginia. During the 1992-1993 school year, Ohio introduced a voluntary school-based initiative in collaboration with the state's Special Education Regional Resource Centers. This Intervention-Based Assessment (IBA) model emphasized early intervention by focusing on elementary- and preschool-aged children (Barnett, Bell, Gilkey, Lentz, Graden, Stone, Smith, & Macmann, 1999). In 1993, the Minneapolis Public Schools (2001) embarked on a reform effort changing the role of both special and general education personnel (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003) so that formative data focuses instruction and accommodates students in the general education environment.

In focusing on the role school principals play in designing, leading, and assisting Vermont's Educational Support Teams (EST) program, Shepherd (2006) analyzed emerging themes representing the characteristics of school leaders associated with successful ESTs. Analysis revealed that school principals advanced the use of collaborative and data-based decision-making processes. Further, as vital team members, these leaders aligned team processes and outcomes to school improvement efforts via five

critical contributions: (a) establishing commitment to the team through participation and support, (b) creating appropriate structures and membership, (c) modeling and fostering the use of effective collaborative meeting processes, (d) connecting team processes to professional development and school improvement, and (e) collaborating with other administrators to implement state policies to enhance the development of these teams.

**Echgan Palaber Educational Service.** In 2004, the Echgan Palaber School District appointed a Guidance Curriculum Task Force to formally establish a Procedural Handbook of the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.). The resulting 42-page assortment of over-photocopied applications and forms confirmed the longstanding practice known around the district as “the meeting before you have the real meeting.” In blunt terms, the E.P.E.S. Team convenes to ceremoniously hand over to the Child Study Team (CST) members in attendance the documents required to initiate a special education referral. Although offering all the procedural accoutrements of a building-based, collaborative, problem-solving session, the E.P.E.S. event is characterized by two untiring questions: “When can this student be removed from my classroom?” and, “When can we get the parent to provide written consent for the CST evaluations?” Despite the 21<sup>st</sup> century insignia on the handbook, this is how the teaching and special education business has been done for decades. This is status quo.

Infrequently, an objectionable retort to one of those questions is uttered. In that hypothetical situation, backs stiffen, eyes turn toward the transgressor, voices raise, and then ... someone dares to ask about the reading curriculum, the literacy program being provided, the student’s response to the basic skills interventions, and the behavioral strategies delivered in the general education setting. But there are no data, no graphs, and



no work samples. The nurse stealthily moves toward the exit and slides the health record, including the vision and hearing screening, across the table. The presiding guidance counselor (who neither guides nor counsels) scans the ceiling for an errant clue and wonders how he also serves as the building administrator's appointee. The parent could not attend; neither did the literacy coordinator, the ESL Teacher, the Basic Skills Instructor, nor the Reading Recovery Teacher. On one side of table – even more noticeably now – sits the referring teacher and two colleagues, and on the other: the school psychologist, the school social worker, and the learning disabilities teacher consultant. In the majority of cases, the CST accepts the referral. And, if they can establish eligibility, there still will be no skirmish. However, today the school psychologist recognizes, for good reason, that a referral for special education is premature. Recommendations (e.g., differentiated instruction, counseling, environmental accommodations) are made and a 4-week follow-up meeting is scheduled. A pall descends upon the gathering. The next day (and expectedly), the referring teacher marches down to the CST office holding a sample Parent Request for Child Study Team Evaluation letter-form (from the E.P.E.S. Handbook) signed by the parent. Smugly and victoriously, she chides: “I guess you’ll have to do your job now!”

The Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.) is not pretentious. For those who work in the district, it does exactly what it is intended to do: Get students directly to the Child Study Team for determination of eligibility for programming and services. However, as an educational service, as a program designed to implement quality instruction and remedial services to struggling students, as a support service to assist teachers, and as a framework to deliver curricula, gather and analyze data, assess

achievement, progress and outcomes, and inform our organizational vision and mission, E.P.E.S only pretends to be an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process.

### **A Transformational Intervention and Referral Services Framework**

A goal for introducing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) framework within all the schools of the Echgan Palaber School District is to change the thinking, the stories, the mental models, and the expectations of teachers and administrators. Instead of referring a student to another classroom, the process is transformed with the teacher seeking assistance to implement her own higher caliber instructional program within her classroom. Rather than viewing the student's academic or behavior challenges as problems – that is, framing them as internal, child-centered deficits – the I&RS structure promotes an understanding of student learning which is generated from the interactions of effective leadership, teacher competencies, student entry skills, potent curricula and instruction, and attentive monitoring and modifications. From this novel perspective, the student's classroom difficulties can be defined as resulting from instructional mismatches between the current performances of the student and of the teacher. Most importantly, the I&RS process assists the teacher in acquiring new strategies and techniques. In addressing a student's academic and behavioral challenges with refined instruction and individualized interventions in the general education classroom, an I&RS platform is purposively designed and implemented to bridge the chasm between a student's instructional level and the teacher's instructional delivery.

To improve student achievement, researchers (e.g., Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010) concur that school leaders must: (a) establish and maintain a safe, orderly school climate

where things operate smoothly; (b) focus on parent and community support and engagement; (c) provide instructional guidance, including an aligned and enriched curriculum, instructional guidance, and academic press; (d) establish and build trust with teachers, students, parents, and the community; (e) read, interpret, and respect context (a school's demographic, historical, political, and cultural characteristics); (f) attend to teacher hiring, support, assignment, and retention; (g) redesign or structure the school organization so that priorities are consistently addressed; (h) distribute leadership and approach leadership as a collective responsibility for teachers and parents; (i) encourage the use of data and research; (j) develop people; and (k) allocate resources (i.e., people, time, money, space) in relationship to priorities. As a school leader in the Echgan Palaber School District, I have set the priority of searching administrators' and teachers' ideas to better promote our educational vision and mission and to collaboratively establish an I&RS process functioning as a springboard for further district investigation and change. This undertaking and the precipitating organizational analysis will formulate a new system of thinking, one in which we create instructional growth and promote learning as professionals for the sake of student learning (Argyris, 1990; Fullan, 2003; Senge, 2006).

### **What Should Be Special About Education**

Teaching and the continual refinement of instructional practices need to be the most essential aspects of any school's activities. And, the educational community must redouble its efforts to empower, affirm, and assist teachers. Therefore, teachers must be special. Teachers need to be at the epicenter of decisions that affect their professional existence – and, consequently, that of their students – to ensure that the delivery of quality services engages the student and the way the student learns best. In restructuring

schools and altering the status quo, the challenge boldly demands an evolutionary and transformational re-definement of the teaching role. Regarding highly effective classrooms, Tolstoy (1967) illustrated that every teacher must, “by regarding every imperfection in the pupil’s comprehension not as a defect in the pupil, but as a defect in his instruction, endeavor to develop himself the ability of discovering new methods” (p. 77). School districts must view professional development for educators from different perspectives. Rather than recording professional growth as what administrators and teachers get from outside trainers, professional and proficient learning must permeate the system and be defined by what educators do with inside and outside experiences to maximize their capacity to help students attain greater successes. The requisite professional development should be collaborative, context-embedded, and congruent with the values of the learning community. Critically, a sustainable way to ensure that the students of tomorrow will be taught by adept, adaptable, enthusiastic, and engaging professionals, whose purposeful practice meets their needs for preparation, creativity, curiosity, and resilience, is to develop teachers – *to grow people* – who can generate change from within the school, relying on planning, acting, observation, and reflection. When learning is a self-directed task, the enterprise becomes enjoyable and nourishing.

Throughout this research study, I monitor my progress as a transformational leader through (a) my conceptualization of a strategic vision or goal that evokes the attention of my educational community; (b) my ability to clearly communicate that vision through words, manners, and symbolism; (c) my capacity to build trust by being consistent, dependable, and persistent; and (d) my positive self-regard in striving for success (Bennis & Nanus, 1997). In Chapter 4, I explain in greater detail my research

methodology for implementing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process within my school district. This project is designed to refocus the Echgan Palaber School District as a learning community through a bottom-up facilitation of information-sharing, confidence-finding, vitality-observing, and trust-building professional relationships. This is no less than a district-wide effort to revitalize the professional practice of teachers by changing the organizational culture. The conceptual framework for organizational change is developed through a re-learning, re-understanding, and re-commitment to our educational stakeholders' values and systems of thinking that drive our instructional processes.

I encourage you to continue along on this journey. Ahead waits the conversations and the stories – in the voices of those who took responsibility for this needed educational change – of what was planned, how things went, what worked well, what things were helpful in transforming the programmatic infrastructure of our schools, and what possibly could be done in the future.

## Chapter 4

### Methodology

Our behavior and our attitudes are shaped by the images, assumptions, and stories that we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world ... Because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are often untested and unexamined.

(Senge, 2000, p. 67)

Simply stated, the dual purpose of my action within this study was to improve an educational systems practice within the public school district where I am employed and to inform my emerging and transforming leadership theory-in-use. As a multi-cyclic project (see Appendix A), this action research study examined teachers' and administrators' perceptions and reactions to the development and implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process within the Echgan Palaber Public Schools. This district traditionally relies on a political, top-down, and status-quo dynamic that inhibits cooperative learning opportunities and eschews a distributed leadership paradigm. Historically, the 11 neighborhood schools have struggled with high numbers of referrals to special education and with high costs and other complications associated with the evaluation, placement (i.e., in-district and out-of district), and specialized services and resources associated with special education. With elevated classification rates of 16.4%, 17.3%, and 16.4% for three consecutive years compared with a declining 12.4% state average, the district has repeatedly failed to address these concerns. Moreover, the issues and obstacles are routinely framed as problems with or within the student and/or with the special education department.

While the impact on special education programming remains profound, few school community members recognize the lapses in general education that deny a high proportion of struggling students any high quality, differentiated instruction, or remedial intervention prior to consideration for special education. The standing pre-referral process is viewed by staff merely as a formality and a precursor to a referral to the child study team and ultimately the classification of the student. During three action plan cycles implemented across 11 schools, using record reviews, observations and checklists, qualitative surveys, focus group sessions, semi-structured interviews, and a reflective journal process, I discovered that my leadership is derived from servant, democratic, and social justice leadership styles. Moreover, the implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) system through transformational, trusting, distributed leadership makes movement toward meaningful improvements to classroom-based interventions, teacher empowerment, and student achievement. As a teacher-assisting-teacher forum and a professional development activity, this pre-referral instruction process provided a focal point for the exploration of reflective practice and collegial dialogue.

### **Five Research Questions**

This action research study addressed the following questions, regarding leadership: (a) How can I establish a partnership of administrators, teachers, support staff, and other learning community members in order to honestly and critically evaluate our current teaching practices for struggling learners?; (b) How can my leadership engage the educational stakeholders for the purposes of developing and then implementing an intervention and referral services process that enhances the overall quality of instruction in each of our schools?; (c) How can my leadership provide a road map to creating and

sustaining a school culture based on mutual trust and respect where the organization institutionalizes the essential changes for doing the important work of teaching, learning, and leading?; regarding organization: (d) How have the suggestions of the educational stakeholders been incorporated within the organization to build a learner-centered intervention and referral services process that enhances the vision of school improvement and shares the responsibility for its success?; and, regarding change: (e) What has occurred within this organization when the professional learning community was allowed to shift from isolated practices to collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility, the freedom to ask for assistance, and opportunity to overcome an immunity to change?

### **An Action Plan with Qualitative Aspects**

As a district supervisor of special education working in an urban public school setting, I spend a considerable amount of time in the classrooms, in the hallways, and in individualized education program (IEP) team meetings. In seeing and listening to the challenges, frustrations, and needs of teachers, students, and concerned family members and advocates, I understand that the prospect of improving our educational practices always exists. Therefore, methods from the qualitative domain offer me opportunities to explore and understand real social or human dilemmas – such as, poor student achievement and ineffective instructional strategies – as ascribed meaning and importance by those educational school stakeholders (Creswell, 2009; Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). Within this exploratory, dynamic process of open-minded inquiry, I focused on in-depth interactions of the participants and gained access to a variety of perspectives (Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), regarding the pre-referral instruction process. I am comfortable with an action research method which might gather



information through qualitative and, sometimes, quantitative means (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Sagor, 1992) and its capacity to draw out the context-rich themes from the voices of those most involved.

Emerging from the disciplines of cultural anthropology and American sociology (Kirk & Miller, 1986), qualitative research approaches have been readily adopted by educational researchers (Borg & Gall, 1989) and, within the last 20 years, have proven invaluable in making sense of a social phenomenon by comparing, contrasting, or classifying the study's objective (Creswell, 2008; Wolcott, 2008). Qualitative research can be distinguished from quantitative methodology by numerous unique characteristics that are inherent in the design. Foremost, qualitative research occurs in natural settings, where the human behavior and events occur (Glesne, 2006). The researcher – and not some static instrument – is the primary instrument for data collection (Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the interest honed on the process that is occurring, as well as the product or outcome, the research targets how things occur (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990), the participants' perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2009), and the way the participants make sense of their lives (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007). Data that emerge from a qualitative study are descriptive; reported in the participant's words or pictures, rather than in numbers (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Furthermore, in the qualitative tradition, objectivity and truthfulness are critical. The researcher strives for believability, based on coherence, insight, and instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991) and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures.

With qualitative inquiry recognized as an overarching term covering many different constructivist (and some post-positivist) research approaches (Glesne, 2006), I also incorporate into this study elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using constant comparison analysis of information and themes emerging throughout the over-lapping cycles of note-taking, coding, and interpretation (Charmaz, 2006), grounded theory derives a general, abstract theory of process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of the participants. For this action research project, I appraised current and archived district documents, conducted observations of pre-referral instruction team meetings, considered data from checklists and surveys, and chronicled conversations with involved school community members during focus group sessions, informal conversations, and interviews. Critically, I sought out a sampling of different groups within the school community to maximize the similarities and the differences of the material. With the intention of generating a reciprocal relationship between data and theory (Creswell, 2009), I identified emergent themes in our district's pre-referral instruction process, in our staff training and professional development practices, in the connections to instructional, remedial, and collaborative practices, and in leadership theory.

In wanting to strengthen the statement, the methodological justifications, and the insights for my study, I considered employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative aspects. Mixed methods research has gained in popularity, largely because it affords an expanded understanding of complex social and health science research issues that is often only inadequately addressed by either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Nevertheless, I recognize my scholarly inquiry to be defined by the

traditional, advocacy, participatory, and self-reflective perspectives of qualitative research. Yet, my use of a survey tool suggests a different purpose: that of constructing quantitative descriptors and then describing numerical distributions of the responses of the educational stakeholders in my schools. This is not the emergent design, the theoretical lens, the interpretive inquiry, or the holistic account I intended. I remain most interested in the diversity (not distribution) of member characteristics within this population and I anticipated this developing through an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In questioning the application of a qualitative survey, I learned that it is used in a casual way in various fields of empirical research. Surprisingly, the term qualitative survey (and/or the alternative, diversity survey) is almost non-existent both in textbooks on general social research methodology (e.g., Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brennan, 2008) and in textbooks on qualitative research methods (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2009). To define and investigate variation in populations, the qualitative type of survey does not aim at establishing frequencies, means, or other parameters but at determining the diversity of some topic of interest within a given population. Fink (2003) recommends the use of a qualitative survey for the exploration of meanings and experiences. Therefore, within this action research design, I employ pre-structured surveys that search for the empirical diversity in the properties of the participants, even if these properties are expressed in numbers.

Schram (2006) posits that many researchers view narrative inquiry as “counteracting the fragmentation and reassembly of data” (p. 104). In agreement, I analyzed not only meanings and motives, but also how these meanings and motives

connected to the ways people structure the flow of their lives. Narrative inquiry relies on the lived experiences of people, and the inter-connections of context, temporality, actions, and certainty (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), as much as it warrants my personal involvement. It provides a framework for *telling the story* of our district's pre-referral instruction process, through the experiences of the participants. For that reason, I focused on how specific people – people I work with, and I – make sense of our workplace, how we recount events, and how this “[l]iving, telling, retelling, and reliving mark the qualities of life” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 187). I appreciate the strategies of reflective journaling, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry as ways of thinking and I recognize the structure of action research as a means to improve practice through cycles of self-study, action, and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

### **Double-Loop Learning and Overcoming an Immunity to Change**

There is a difference between what people say and what people do. Further, this is often the point of detachment between the good intention (for a desired outcome) and the best exertion defined by steadfast and repetitive (but fruitless) courses of action. In other words, doing the same thing over and over, regardless of the qualities of your intention or your effort, will not result in a different outcome. Regarding the change framework for this research study, the ability to adapt the complex meaning-making system within each person and within an organization has everything to do with closing the gap between the espoused theory (i.e., what people say they value) and the theory-in-use (i.e., what behaviors people choose to demonstrate).

As this action research study seeks to investigate organizational beliefs, thoughts, and practices within the Echgan Palaber School District, regarding the implementation of

an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, and within my own leadership platform, the work of Argyris (1990; 2008a; 2008b) and Kegan and Lahey (2009) offers a path to achieving second-order change through double-loop learning. According to Kegan and Lahey, self-reflection that acknowledges the resistance and obstacles to change, within a person or a system, makes possible the ability to effectively accomplish unending progress. An important first step is to find a better way to recognize and interrupt our powerful inclination not to change. To that end, the process needs to appreciate the underlying mechanisms through which an individual, a group, or a system communicates, complains, makes meaning, focuses on a common goal, shares the work, employs technologies, and builds processes that enhance the prospect of organizational integrity. Through a complex meaning-making process (Kegan, 1977), individuals give relevance to their experiences, and these guide their perceptions, thinking, feeling, attitudes, and actions. That is, we invent an image or build a structure of our world, we establish the status quo, and we safeguard the resulting equilibrium.

School administrators and teachers have many opportunities to consciously examine what they are learning from existing and lately implemented initiatives. In the case of the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.), this research study affords the chance to appraise the accomplishments and disappointments of that system, to investigate what structures, commitments, assumptions, mindsets, behaviors, and expectations have supported these operations, and to initiate the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model as an experiment for change. Most school organizations detect issues or obstacles through single-loop learning (Argyris, 2008a) and tend to rely on current policies, past routines, or comfortable practices to make corrections. In contrast,

double-loop learning (Argyris, 2008b; Collinson, 2006) ensures that any fault in the system is rectified in ways that involve the modification of the school's goals, policies, and standard operating procedures. Therefore, in comprehending our resistances and overcoming our personal defenses, we set aside old ways of thinking and then initiate movements that support transformational practices and effective leadership. Through double-loop learning, a learning organization creates a public and collective capacity to sense and interpret an evolving environment; to input new knowledge through life-long learning and continuous adjustment; to imbed this knowledge in systems and practices for change; and to transform this knowledge into radically different, smarter, and enhanced solutions.

### **The Research Paradigm**

Action research is a “search for answers to questions relevant to educators’ immediate interests, with the primary goal of putting the findings immediately into practice” (McKay, 1992, p. 18). Within this process, teachers and administrators are afforded the opportunity to explore and experiment with different teaching and leadership methods in a constructive and positive manner. Growing professionally and personally, the educators gain a sense of empowerment and assume, perhaps, greater responsibility for the future of their teaching and learning. And clearly, these are highly desirable outcomes. I recognize the democratic and participatory potential of action research as bringing together for me reflecting and doing, and theorizing and teaching, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions, within the school district where I am employed. I agree with Sagor (1992) that action research encompasses, research for action, research in action, and research of action.

During the 1940s, Kurt Lewin (1946) conceptualized a study of social science (e.g., group dynamics) in which practitioners and researchers might bridge the gap between social action and social theory (as cited in Peters & Robinson, 1984). He formulated a methodology of “analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, execution, more fact-finding or evaluation; and then a repetition of this whole circle of activities; indeed a spiral of such circles” (as cited in Sanford, 1970, p. 4). Though Collier (1945) would coin the term action research and first apply it to studies for the improvement of Native American farming practices, Lewin’s original definition would inspire countless researchers to engage in studies that cycled back and forth between ever-deepening scrutiny of problematic social situations involving individuals, organizations, and systems (Cunningham, 1993). Moreover, the overlapping of action and reflection would encourage changes in plans for participants to learn from their experiences (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

For an interpretivist investigation of teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions and reactions to the development and implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process within the Echgan Palaber Public Schools, I incorporated Lewin’s action research model, specifically the spiraled and recursive steps of (a) planning, (b) acting, (c) observing, and (d) reflecting (Lewin, 1946; Sanford, 1970). Importantly, through my leadership theory-in-use, I facilitated a research environment (i.e., our schools) that provided (a) a forum for staff to share findings and frustrations; (b) available colleagues to help articulate the obstacles (c) opportunities to educate, but not indoctrinate; (d) time to rethink, review, and relive principles; (e) supportive research partners; and (f) tolerance for changes within the school and the classrooms (Watson & Stevenson, 1989).

I recognize that this methodology itself might prove more informative and valuable than the project's results. And because I seek new, deeper understandings – not the positivist researcher's truth – I share my work so that others dealing with these pre-referral process issues may find my methodologies, strategies, and insights useful. As a value-laden change paradigm, the action research process encourages risk-taking, provides built-in safety nets to counter failure, elevates participants from educators to scholar-practitioners, improves instructional practices and student achievement, and develops a healthier climate that supports educational reform.

### **My Participant-Researcher's Role**

I acknowledge that as the participant-researcher my role requires me to be the primary data collection instrument (Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, my personal values, assumptions, and biases, formulated from my life experiences, influence every aspect of this project. My perceptions of public school, classrooms and teachers, instructional practices, special education, and leadership have been shaped by these subjective involvements. Critically, I believe that my research contributions are worthwhile and constructive. While I choose not to recite my curriculum vita in the following paragraphs, I do note that I am a son, a brother, a husband, a father, and an uncle (many times over); I am an educator, a doctoral student, a district supervisor in a public school, a president of a local Board of Education, and a member of the Board of Directors for our state's school board association; I have served as a school psychologist, a counselor, a behavior therapist, a coach, and blue-collar and white-collar laborer (in various capacities and employments); and I have attended schooling in public schools, parochial schools, public colleges, private colleges, and community colleges.



I bring certain biases to this project and these are discussed in greater detail throughout this document, most poignantly in Chapter 2. I initiated this study with the belief that classroom teachers need to enhance their teaching strategies and differentiate instruction; that supervisors need to provide more support and resources; that administrators and Boards of Education need to provide better vision, direction, professional development, and leadership; and that school stakeholders need to be engaged with schools, parents, and the larger community. The difficulty is not the student. Drilling more deeply, I am extremely skeptical of any teacher or instructional support staff who believes he or she has done everything that can be done for a student and who feels professionally comfortable and satisfied to say: Send this student somewhere else!

I believe special education needs to be extraordinary. Moreover, I believe there is a difference between a weakness and a disability. I support the New Jersey Department of Education's definition (NJDOE, 2006) of "eligible for special education and related services" when (a) the student has one or more of the recognized disabilities, (b) that "the disability adversely affects the student's educational performance," and (c) "the student is in need of special education and related services" (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.5[c], p. 53).

Further, but not exhaustively, I view the pre-referral instruction process as more than a cursory step to classification for special education. However, I believe it unethical to deny a student needed specialized services. Critically for this project, I demand more from the pre-referral instruction action plan; I demand better from the teacher and his or her 21<sup>st</sup> century, instructional bag of tricks; I demand exceptional professional development and training from the administration; and I demand more from me.

## **Ethical Considerations**

First and foremost, I acknowledge and accept my obligation to respect and protect the rights, needs, values, and desires of those who participated in this study.

During the course of this project, I experienced several ethical predicaments relative to my role as the district supervisor of special education and the relationships I have with administrators, instructional, disciplinary and support staff, and other members of the school community. There were situations when participants might have perceived any potential response as compromising their allegiances within the organization or negatively impacting their employment or their personnel record. In other cases, staff could have challenged my role as researcher versus employee/leader and questioned my intentions for this project, in light of what might be best for the students, teachers, and community. In addition to assuring staff of their rights as participants and of my requirements as the participant researcher, I held myself to my personal and professional code of ethics (see Appendix L), as well as to the Codes of Ethics provided by my professional associations.

Importantly and significantly, my leadership theory-in-use assisted me in traversing the landmines of our administrative bureaucracy and the hazards of the political hierarchy. As I reflected throughout this study, the Echgan Palaber School District, though heavily burdened with rules and regulations, is entrenched in a dated business-as-usual, it-worked-before(-I-think?) mentality. Any change could have been perceived as a threat; and all threats must be confronted with a display of force, self-righteousness, and undisputed authority. My leadership theory-in-use nurtured positive, trusting relationships between myself and all stakeholders, as well as among I&RS

committee members and instructional staff seeking assistance and among administrators, teachers, and support staff operating within this new paradigm. Confidently I report that the new pre-referral instruction process generated unprecedented interest and professional buy-in, with extraordinary support on all levels throughout the district.

**Institutional Review Board.** A Human Research Review Application was completed and submitted to the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approved this research study and, therein, the efforts I would employ to protect the rights of the participants. In addition, the Board of Education and the Superintendent of the Echgan Palaber School District were provided a complete overview of this project, including a summary of the issues, the purpose, the timeline and cycles of action, data and documentation, the anticipated outcome, and the what-ifs and impact of addressing the district's pre-referral instruction model and practices. Further, in compliance with the district's policy and with the requirements of the Rowan University Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, written permission for this project was obtained from the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum & Instruction, on behalf of the Board.

In order to protect the privacy of the teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders who participated in this project, as well as to respect the larger community associated with the school system, I proactively decided to employ pseudonymous names throughout this research study. Although no refusal of anonymity was received, I was prepared to honor a participant's request to retain ownership of his or her voice and to exert his or her independence in making decisions. My intention throughout was to afford all stakeholders in the educational process the opportunity to have their voices heard, considered, and included. For Institutional Review Board compliance, all participants

were provided information relevant to the project. Informed, written consent was obtained. There was never intent to judge or evaluate participants and all efforts were made to minimize any risk of harm resulting from participation in this project. No participant was provided financial compensation for their involvement. Importantly, participants were afforded the opportunity to initially decline participation as well as to discontinue involvement at any part in the project, with neither consequence nor penalty. In the event that any unanticipated effects on the participants occurred during the study or as a result of the actions taken, I was prepared to file a report with the IRB.

### **The Natural Setting and the Participants**

The Echgan Palaber School District is a public school district serving students in prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in New Jersey. The district has two primary schools, six elementary schools, one preschool facility, one alternative high school, and one high school. During the 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12 school years, the district's 11 schools, including special education students placed in off-site settings, had an average enrollment not exceeding 7,000 students, with approximately 475 general education teachers, 125 special education teachers, 60 Basic Skills instructors, 32 English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors, 22 early intervention instructors, 18 language arts literacy instructors, 105 instructional support staff, 53 safety officers, 23 school counselors, 11 school nurses, seven speech-language specialists, five school psychologists, four learning disabilities teacher-consultants, four school social workers, two community social workers, and two student assistance coordinators (SAC) (full-time, in-district staff). Each school had a principal and at least one assistant principal. The high school had four assistant principals and five curriculum supervisors. Central office and itinerant staff

included 15 district supervisors, one bilingual facilitator, one special education literacy coordinator, one preschool literacy and math coach, one primary (level) literacy coach, two elementary (level) literacy coaches, and five math coaches.

The district is categorized by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) as a District Factor Group (DFG) A. DFGs organize districts statewide to allow comparison by common socioeconomic status (SES) characteristics of the local districts, from lowest (A) to highest (J). Economically, the district is equivalent to Elizabeth, Jersey City, Newark, and Paterson. Based on demographic data from the 2010-11 school year, the ethnic distribution of all students within the Echgan Palaber School District is: 39.2% Black; 37.8% Hispanic; 15.1% Asian/Pacific Islander; and 7.9% White. This distribution is not represented equally across all schools. Concerning students found eligible for special education and related services, the district's classification rates for the past three years are: 16.4% (2008-09); 17.3% (2009-10); and 16.4% (2010-11), as compared with a declining 12.4% New Jersey State average. Within each ethnic grouping during the 2010-11 school year, the district reported that 20.7% of Black students, 17.9% of White students, 15.2% of Hispanic students, and 6.9% of Asian/Pacific Islander students were eligible for special education and related services. While the percentage of classified students by school reveals a range of 5.5% to 43.3%, this reflects more accurately the district's practice of placing students in existing programs, rather than instructing students in their home schools. Further, the ethnic distribution of classified students across all schools, including out-of-district placements, for the 2010-11 school year, is: 49.7% Black; 35.3% Hispanic; 8.6% White; and 6.4% Asian/Pacific Islander.

## **Foreword to a Study**

During my first 16 months as a doctoral student in the Rowan University Educational Leadership program, I successfully completed 12 graduate courses. I was enthusiastically motivated by my return to school, the exposure to 21<sup>st</sup> century theories, research, and knowledge, the opportunities to apply leadership skills to actual workplace issues, and the pluses of keeping pace with an outstanding cohort of like-minded professionals. There were at least a half-dozen projects that could have evolved into a dissertation proposal. In designing a study for partial completion of the Leadership Application Fieldwork and Seminar course, I was intrigued by the relative absence in the literature of an understanding of the underlying mental models and beliefs of school administrators regarding instructional leadership. In focusing on my district's educational vision, by encouraging reflective practice, and through empowering others to become leaders in their own right, I sought answers to: (a) How does an administrator become a transformational leader? (b) How did that transformational administrator acquire the characteristics, qualities, or behaviors that define his or her leadership profile? and (c) Is that administrator's effectiveness contingent on being a transformational leader or in demonstrating behaviors that lead to organizational change and/or school improvement? In that qualitative study (Lee, 2010), interesting but disconcerting themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews I completed with six school leaders. The research design affirmed my interest in and the value of narrative inquiry, the interview process, and data collection, coding, and analysis. Nevertheless, the findings brought to light a significant flaw in my study: Identifying oneself as such does not a transformational leader make.

In accepting that effective instructional leaders create successful restructuring initiatives within their schools primarily with second-order changes, I anticipated uncovering themes of building a shared vision, improving communication, and developing collaborative decision-making processes (Duke, 1987). Further, I predicted that through the coding process there would be evidence of Leithwood's (1996) transformational leadership practices (e.g., setting directions; developing people; and redesigning the organization) and some representation of Waters, Marzano, and McNulty's (2003) 21 specific leadership practices. My findings (Lee, 2010) identified the consistent presence of only one second-order change theme: declaring to be an agent of change. There was a congregation of first-order change themes, such as maintaining discipline, order, routine, and structure; being an advocate of school for all stakeholders; ensuring compliance with regulations and requirements; and improving the technical and instructional activities of the school through monitoring of teachers' and students' classroom work. However, I did not discover evidence of second-order change themes with which these six administrators might: (a) seek-out or keep abreast of research on effective practices, (b) adapt one's leadership style to the demands of the current situations, or (c) provide an optimistic view of what the school is doing and what the school can accomplish in the future.

However, my disillusionment in these transformational leaders was quickly supplanted by panic and frustration as I considered the fate of any district educational initiative that came across one of their desks. Coincidentally, I was investigating at that time my district's pre-referral intervention process and the dubious practices that did not seem to do much in cultivating teaching strategies to help struggling students. My

intention was to draft a proposal for an intervention and referral services (I&RS) scaffolding to facilitate the introduction of a multi-tiered response to intervention model and to transform the system from referring-a-student to *assisting-a-teacher*. To that end, I was granted permission to gather information through district surveys and interviews. To create the District Survey – E.P.E.S. (see Appendix B), the Survey for Every E.P.E.S. Team Member (see Appendix C), and the Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey (see Appendix E), I used an accepted method (Patten, 2001) in which I reconfigured the questions posed to me by the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum & Instruction and her District Supervisors; the items were reviewed and revised by the supervisor overseeing the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.) and a supervisor overseeing the Child Study Teams; each survey was put through a think-outloud with selected school leaders and teachers; and then each was field tested with teachers not associated with our district.

Within my scope of responsibility as district supervisor of special education, I collected data regarding student achievement, attendance, graduation rates, and drop-out rates; referral rates to our E.P.E.S. pre-referral intervention program as well as to our special education Child Study Teams; special education information, including classification rates, declassification rates, and placement of students in the continuum of programs; summaries of earlier district-wide and school-based climate surveys; participation of staff at E.P.E.S. meetings, as well as results and outcomes of these meetings; the district's distribution of staff across all schools; and feedback from staff regarding curriculum initiatives, instructional resources, and professional development offerings. I maintained a data binder, a field notes log, and a reflection journal. I



consulted with experts in the field of pre-referral interventions, including the New Jersey Department of Education and other organizations, and I spoke with staff in several school districts who manage or participate on pre-referral intervention teams. I observed several E.P.E.S. meetings, at different schools, around my district. I studied the survey results. With a 75.6% response rate, the findings from the District Survey completed during school faculty meetings revealed, in part, that the vast majority of staff believes the primary outcome of any referral to E.P.E.S. is to have a student classified and then receive special education services (see Table 1). Equally distressing were the reportings

Table 1  
*Response to District Survey – E.P.E.S. question #4 (n = 797)*

*If you were to seek assistance from E.P.E.S. today for a struggling student in your classroom, what primary outcome would you expect?*

<b>Response:</b>	<b>Number of responses:</b>	<b>Percentage of responses:</b>
I would not request assistance from E.P.E.S..	118	14.8%
The student would be classified and receive special education services.	507	63.6%
The parent would become more involved in the student's educational program	25	3.1%
The teachers – myself included – would be provided with instructional suggestions, supports, and resources to better meet that student's needs.	111	13.9%
I cannot answer this question.	36	4.5%

that nearly 15% of staff would “not request assistance from E.P.E.S.” for a struggling student and fewer still would expect “instructional suggestions, supports, and resources.” From the E.P.E.S. Team Survey completed by 53 of 80 members, data suggested that only less than 25% of respondents received some form of pre-referral intervention training prior to (see Table 2) or while (see Table 3) serving as a member of an E.P.E.S. Team. With my knowledge of scholarly research regarding this topic, analysis of the triangulation of the aforementioned data points further informed my next actions. I formulated this dissertation proposal and then approached my administrators in the Echgan Palaber School District to form an Intervention and Referral Services Task Force.

Table 2

*Response to Survey for Every E.P.E.S. Team Member question #5 (n = 53)*

*List the pre-referral intervention training you received prior to becoming a member of an E.P.E.S. Team:*

<b>Response:</b>	<b>Number of responses:</b>	<b>Percentage of responses:</b>
“None” / “Not applicable” / “Don’t know”	30	56.6%
No Response Provided or Left Blank	13	24.5%
“College” / “College Courses”	7	13.2%
“Professional Development” / “District in-service” / “Some (training)”	3	5.7%

Table 3

*Response to Survey for Every E.P.E.S. Team Member question #7 (n = 53)*

*List the pre-referral intervention training you received during the time you have been a member of an E.P.E.S. Team:*

<b>Response:</b>	<b>Number of responses:</b>	<b>Percentage of responses:</b>
“None” / “Not applicable” / “Don’t know”	29	54.7%
No Response Provided or Left Blank	11	20.8%
“Professional Development” / “District in-service” / “Some (training)” / “Training at ETTSC/SRI”	11	20.8%
“Meetings” / “On-hand training”	2	3.7%

### **Summary of the Action Research Study**

Using a qualitative strategy of inquiry, I sought out the voices within our educational community as they appraised the accomplishments and disappointments of the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.). In listening to the stories and observing the meetings, I investigated what structures, commitments, assumptions, mindsets, behaviors, and expectations supported the system. Then, as a member of the District Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) Task Force, I designed, initiated, and trained staff in a philosophically unique and expansive I&RS process. To take full advantage of a simultaneous procedure of data collection and data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), I ensured that I had the benefit of rich, detailed descriptions of the findings, varying perspectives, and meaningful details (Creswell, 2009; Hinchey, 2008). Further, in culling a comprehensive representation of the issues impacting the use of the I&RS viewpoint and scaffolding, I attended to how the educational stakeholders

perceived the transition and how the transformational development impacted the teaching-learning progression within the Echgan Palaber School District.

**Data Collection, Rigor of Analysis, and Process for Interpretation.** Through an action research paradigm, the overlapping of cycles, as well as the repetitive strategies of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, were designed to inform my subsequent actions and provided ample opportunities for adjustments. Plainly, I strived to listen to the *voice* of the data and to make sense of the larger meaning of information and the stories. Data collection tools were designed to capture the feelings, thoughts, and actions of staff relative to the transition between pre-referral instruction/intervention services processes, as well as to the transformation in thinking and in implementation of the new philosophy of assisting a teacher adjust instructional strategies to align with that struggling student's level of learning. The resulting information was analyzed and coded for themes using qualitative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006).

For the first step in the analysis process, I processed the raw data and transcribed all interviews, field notes, observations, checklists, surveys, and journal entries into Microsoft Word documents; accuracy was verified through a quick reread. During this step of the analysis, I merely sought a tone or general meaning for the data. Frequently, I scribbled notes in the margins to capture my reactions. During subsequent reviews of the transcribed data, I initiated a coding process to manage the information and bring the images and themes into sharper focus. To coordinate and simplify the sorting of categories in the transcripts, I employed color-coded spreadsheets with Microsoft Excel. As themes began to emerge, I began to establish links with my research questions (Creswell, 2009). The final phase of data analysis required interpretation and theorizing

about the findings. In my pursuit of the story and of the meanings, I needed to caution myself that any given interpretation of the data would be just one of many possible explanations (Hinchey, 2008).

**Credibility, Consistency, and Generalizability.** ‘Quality,’ as opposed to ‘validity,’ rolls more readily off my tongue when I contemplate qualitative procedure. Moreover, my attempts to explain what that quality might be or how I could achieve it proved to be the challenge. Yet, these conceptual difficulties were clearly not of my making or familiar only to me (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2009). As I considered data collection options for this project, I kept in mind questions modeled by Charmaz (2006): Are there strong logical connections between the data gathered and my argument and interpretation? Do my categories offer new insights? Do the categories portray the usefulness of the studied phenomenon? Does my analysis offer explanations that other educators can use in their schools, in their classrooms? In other words, I wanted my research to be creative and scientific, credible and believable, and applicable and useful. Through my findings, I endeavored to provide understandings and to bring about desired improvements in instructional, organizational, and professional development practices that are significant to my school and perhaps to your school.

As a standard for judging the quality of my action and research, I recognize that trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) refers to how credible my audience might find the project, based on which questions I ask, who I ask, how many people I ask, and how many different ways I approach or present the inquiry. To these ends, I triangulated different data sources of information, I “interrogated the data” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 99), and I worked to build a coherent justification for themes. Data resulted from interviews,

qualitative surveys, observations, checklists, and document analysis. Further, as I expounded on my action research cycles, in Chapters 5 through 7, I generated rich, thick and detailed descriptions (Creswell, 2009) of the participants, their comments, their concerns, and the settings. I employed member checks (Hinchey, 2008) or respondent validation to offer an opportunity for participants to agree or disagree with my analysis. Also, I included at various opportunities an interested partner or reading-buddy – a member of the District I&RS Task Force, a Rowan University cohort member, or a member of my Dissertation Committee – for peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, throughout this document, I addressed and clarified biases I brought to the study.

In terms of reliability, I used defined approaches, procedures, steps, reactions, and documentation techniques that were consistent throughout the project (Gibbs, 2007; Yin, 2003). My use of qualitative surveys and checklists within the cycles of action not only provided quick snapshot comments and alternative perspectives to the rich conversations and observations, but also structured a protocol. Further, by carefully documenting the steps of this study, in this methodology section and within the body of this paper, I provided a means for a checks-and-balances. Also, I verified the transcription of the videotaped interviews to make sure they did not contain errors. Most importantly, my focus was to minimize breaches in data collection procedures, as well as the unwitting introduction of any biased annotations by me. As appropriate, I invited constructive feedback and recommendations from my dissertation committee members.

While Gibbs (2007) would be quick to caution me on generalizing the findings of this qualitatively influenced action research study to teachers, classrooms, or schools outside of the Echgan Palaber School District, I believe there is room in my discussion

for a broader application of the particular descriptions and themes discovered here. My primary objective remains to realize and appreciate what has occurred in my schools, with my teachers, and determine what might further improve our instructional practices. Whether my findings are typical or not, I will leave up to future participant-researchers. I am confident that with documentation of my procedures, including detailed commentary of the issues, demographics, and the resultant data (Yin, 2003), this study may be repeated in other school districts.

**Action Research Cycle One.** In April 2010, I consulted with my soon-to-be Dissertation Committee Chair and committed to this research study. Cycle One would involve four focus group meetings with district educators and observations of each of the district's E.P.E.S. Teams, including the completion of three meeting checklists (by the researcher, an administrator or designee, and a teacher) for all observed meetings. On June 10, 2010, the Board of Education through the District Administrative Council authorized the formation of the District I&RS Task Force. On June 14, 2010, Rowan University approved the formation of my dissertation committee. This cycle would close in November 2010 following the last E.P.E.S. Team observation.

**Planning.** For Cycle One, my intention was again to offer every educator in the Echgan Palaber School District the opportunity to engage in conversation regarding student achievement, academic support for students, resources for teachers, programming and services within the schools, and the services offered by our pre-referral intervention program. My preliminary work already suggested that the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.) lacks direction, leadership, monitoring, training for staff, and efficiency. In addition, staff inaccurately or poorly understood its purpose. Further, I

sensed hidden agendas, a political backstory, and resistance against any change. As I reflected on my leadership, I recognized a powerful urgency on my part for social justice and to do the right thing for teachers and for students in addressing the broken E.P.E.S.

*Participants.* Months earlier I had introduced myself at every school's faculty meeting and asked that staff complete a District Survey (see Appendix B) regarding the functioning, training, and services surrounding the district's pre-referral intervention process. Included within that survey was the offer to join other professionals to discuss our E.P.E.S. at a later focus group meeting. As I arranged and advertised (see Appendix F) that series of meetings around the district, I contacted those who personally responded to my earlier offer. Four sites were selected from around the district, based on location and clustering of schools; start times were staggered to provide some flexibility for teachers' schedules. On May 11, 2010, at 2:30 p.m., a focus group was conducted at Anderson High School, in the Teachers' Cafeteria. The group in attendance consisted of four general education teachers (three female & one male), three special education teachers (two female & one male), two female school counselors, one male English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor, and one female student assistance coordinator (SAC). At the May 13, 2010, 4:00 p.m. focus group at Pignotti Elementary School, the participants were five female general education teachers, one female special education teacher, and one female school counselor. On May 20, 2010, at 3:00 p.m., a focus group was conducted at Krylov Primary School, in a first floor classroom. Seven general education teachers (six female & one male), one female special education teacher, and two female school counselors participated. A June 8, 2010 meeting was held, at 3:00 p.m., at Sarma Elementary School, in the Principal's Conference Room. This focus group



consisted of four female general education teachers, two female special education teachers, one female school counselor, and one female English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor.

In addition to those large-scale outreaches for participants, I also joined each school's E.P.E.S. Team during one of their regularly scheduled meetings. As suggested by the E.P.E.S. Procedural Handbook, the teams should include "the building administrator, the school counselor, a member of the Child Study Team, the school nurse, the referring teacher, a special education teacher, a literacy coordinator, the parent or guardian, an English as a Second Language instructor, a basic skills instructor, a remedial (e.g., Reading Recovery) instructor, a speech-language specialist, and others if needed." By visiting some schools more than once, I observed 101 participants (i.e., 21 general education/referring teachers; 21 special education teachers; 14 school counselors; 13 Child Study Team members; 11 principals or designees; seven school nurses; six parents; three literacy coordinators; two remedial teachers; and two supervisors) in 13 meetings.

**Acting.** Focus group participants were asked to complete and sign an informed consent document (see Appendix G) to acknowledge that their rights would be protected during data collection. Institutional Review Board compliance guidelines were followed. Participants were provided light refreshments in a comfortable and minimally distracting environment. Introductions were provided, as well as explanations of the purpose of the get-together, of confidentiality, and of the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were invited to respond to each of the questions and were encouraged to share information about their educational career and experiences, as appropriate. No particular ordering of who spoke when was identified and no one was required to respond; yet, to

promote fairness, I prompted participants that one person would speak at a time. Participants were permitted to ask each other follow up questions and, as necessary, I asked for clarification on some comments. The session was audiotaped, and I jotted down notes only occasionally.

During the E.P.E.S. meetings, I took notes on how the event was conducted, who participated and who did not, and what action was taken. In addition, I ensured a checklist (see Appendix D) was completed by myself, the building administrator or designee, and a teacher at each event.

Specific to my transforming leadership and the impact on the research change process, I maintained a personal journal that encouraged an analysis of the congruence between what I espouse as a leader and how I am perceived within and beyond the organization. I chronicled my own thinking, feelings, experiences, and perceptions throughout this action research project. Concurrently, I engaged in an immunity-to-change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) mapping exploration (see Appendix M).

*Instruments of Data Collection.* The items, questions, and prompts showcased in the qualitative instruments used in this action research study emerged from earlier experiences. For the focus group format, I used open-ended questions (see Appendix H) that were the same across interview sessions. This ensured a comparative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and allowed me to freely investigate and understand my research queries. Interview questions were intended to stimulate a lively and continuing interaction between the topic and the participants. To that end, I generated questions that seemed intuitive of my reasoning and understanding of the literature and of the functioning of my district. Then, through pilot testing (Glesne, 2006) with selected

educators and informants, questions were added, rejected, or improved until they were judged by my collaborators to be valuable for a participant to consider. Moreover, I carefully chose questions that would identify something I didn't already know, offer deeper insights on a familiar phenomenon, provoke an assortment of opinions, ideas, beliefs, and perceptions within the group, and possibly "upset any well-entrenched ignorance" (p. 85).

On the observation checklist (see Appendix D), the noted meeting happenings were selected from procedural handbooks from the literature, research, professional organizations, and my district. I received assistance from district school leaders, teachers, and Child Study Team members in finalizing the checklist. Importantly, I conducted a brief field test by spontaneously joining an E.P.E.S. meeting and executing a sample data collection. Modifications to the checklist were made as appropriate.

**Observing.** In addition to the audiotaped conversations that were recorded during the focus group sessions, observational information was gathered throughout this cycle and indicated as field notes and journal entries. I also attended to body language, movements, and other non-verbal communications. During the E.P.E.S. meetings, I witnessed the discrepancies in participants, roles, procedures, and rules of order, and the variability in services offered by E.P.E.S. Teams across the district. In general, there was little discussion of teaching, programs, curriculum, instruction, services, modifications, or accommodations. Oddly, the referring teacher, the parent, or the school principal was not always in attendance. Mostly, the focus was on what the student was not – or incapable of – doing in the classroom. In nearly half of the meetings attended, someone asked if the

student would meet the eligibility for classification – a function that no one at that table had the authority to make.

This information was loudly telling me that E.P.E.S. chiefly serves the Child Study Team. Moreover, data suggested that rather than improving the caliber and quality of instructional services, the E.P.E.S. process takes the moral high-road to circumvent the wait-to-fail conundrum by fast-tracking a student to the Child Study Team. E.P.E.S. abdicates and the special education machinery thumps a refer-test-place cadence. Critically and most compelling for this research, in the circumstance of a not-eligible determination (which could have taken up to three months to conclude), that student would continue to struggle in the classroom of an exasperated teacher who the E.P.E.S. Team had neglected to fortify, equip, and support with – at a minimum – meaningful, effective, and specialized teaching strategies.

**Reflecting.** During my monthly presentations to the District Administrative Council and my more frequent updates to the Assistant Superintendent, the direction of committing to the Intervention and Referral Service (I&RS) framework was becoming inevitable. However, I found myself embattled with fellow school leaders who disapproved that an upstart supervisor – not even operating from his own department – was attempting to form a powerbase, new coalitions, and an agenda that could take control of some resources out of their hands. Dealing with a school district heavily structured on the Political Frame (Bolman & Deal, 2003), I found myself establishing my proposal not on who has the authority to make this decision, but on what the end result would mean to the district’s commitment to its mission and vision and to student achievement. In further appealing from a Symbolic Frame standpoint, I emphasized the

learning culture, our district’s historical background, and the value and significance of such a pro-instructional initiative; and then, I struck an inspirational stance, one that said, ‘I believe in this!’ To a great extent, I recognized the foundations of my transformational leadership style emerging. The Administrative Council soon authorized the formation of a District I&RS Task Force.

As I consulted with my Dissertation Chair, I began to fully realize how elaborate of a study I had proposed. The prospect of five or more cycles, over two to three years, incorporating not only the conceptual and procedural development and implementation of a novel program, but also the extensive professional development required to prepare staff across 11 schools for highly specialized, innovative strategies and techniques, proved unreasonable and excessive. This did not surprise my dissertation committee who pointed out in my four-column immunity-to-change chart (see Appendix M) that I possess a competing commitment to “carrying more weight than humanly possible” and a worry that the “job won’t be perfect!” Such revelations pressed for frank reconsiderations of my earlier chapters and resulted in simplification of my future actions.

**Action Research Cycle Two.** From June 2010 until April 2011, Cycle Two was defined by the operations of the District I&RS Task Force in researching and designing the new Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process. Activities included development of a comprehensive Procedural Handbook; ongoing consultation and feedback from the District Administrative Council, including selected board members, school and community leaders, and educators; presentation to all educational stakeholders; and customized training for district administrators, each school-based I&RS Team, and all Child Study Team members. During the December 13, 2010, public

session, the Board of Education approved the resolution for the I&RS Philosophy, Procedural Handbook, and Training Modules. On January 12, 2011, I received Institutional Review Board approval for this research study. From February through April 2011, each school-based I&RS Team was trained in the new philosophy, procedures, forms, and techniques.

**Planning.** With an executive green-lighting of a District I&RS Task Force in the final weeks of the 2009-2010 school year, this second cycle commenced under extreme pressure from the Assistant Superintendent. Her directive was to have the program up-and-running in three months. Moreover, she created the Task Force by assigning herself and several central office supervisors. My plan to convene a dream-team of enthusiastic, passionate, and conversant teachers, related services and support staff, and building administrators found its rude awakening. Prior to our first meeting on June 24, 2010, I was dumbfounded to learn that two supervisors were permitted to withdraw from the Task Force for health reasons, the E.P.E.S. supervisor requested (and was granted) a “lesser role” in the process, and several Task Force members suggested that to “save time, money, and peoples’ vacations” we merely change the name on the procedural binder. To manage these tribulations, I stayed focused on our community’s plea for instructional improvement and assistance to teachers. I sensed a necessary shift in my leadership style to that of an architect and task manager who defines not only the project’s blueprint, but also facilitates a division of labor. To fill the void in our team dynamic, I knew I needed to adapt, experiment with, and rethink the interconnectedness of structure, strategy, environment, and relationships. And, many clocks were ticking.

*Participants.* The District I&RS Task Force was comprised of the high school Supervisor of Guidance, the elementary Supervisor of Guidance, the Supervisor of Special Education (me), the Supervisor of the Child Study Team, a Supervisor of Curriculum, and the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. These six tenured administrators ranged in age from 48 to 64 years, with an average of 27 years in public education and an average of 16 years at the Echgan Palaber School District. There were three women and three men. As a key point, I note that the elementary Supervisor of Guidance – and not I – directly oversees the district-wide pre-referral intervention system, known as the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.).

*Acting.* I anticipated that the first meeting of the District I&RS Task Force would be tense and uncomfortable. To neutralize these pressures, I did my best to convey a calm levelheadedness that nonetheless radiated sagacity, efficiency, and consensus-building. For example, from designing our first agenda to launching any activities, I emphasized horizontal decision-making and made it clear that the Task Force, not one member, decides our courses of action. I assembled binders of information and resources, especially sample models from across the country and throughout New Jersey. I reiterated our charge to develop, implement, and oversee our district's I&RS system. Further, I shared and interpreted the data that were emerging from my earlier efforts and from Cycle One, particularly from the E.P.E.S. meetings and the four focus group sessions. This successful inaugural meeting was akin to leaping across a wide chasm; that is, one where a string of smaller jumps would not do.

For this second cycle, the District I&RS Task Force needed to consult various sources, including stakeholders within and experts beyond the district, and commit to

restructuring our pre-referral instruction process. Our next steps would be to translate this vision of assisting teachers into a procedural handbook and then initiate a series of training modules throughout the district.

**Observing.** I first made reference to it in my observational notes of the E.P.E.S. meetings. Maybe, it was just something in the district I had become accustomed to or resistant from during my tenure. However, during the Task Force sessions, it seemed inescapable and oppressive: a smugly respectful kowtowing to the district's authority figures wrapped around a prickly resentment toward top-down initiatives. An under-the-breath aside would seem to be: "OK, I'll do this only because you're the boss, but it won't make a difference." The success (or failure) of the enterprise remains largely irrelevant, clearly without ownership, and secondary to following-orders. Status quo is maintained. One's station in the hierarchy is acknowledged and preserved. And, the opportunity to lay blame on the next level up in the organizational structure remains a hallmark of the culture. I was now noticing this phenomenon between teacher and department chairperson, E.P.E.S. Team member and principal, and supervisor and central administrator, as well as during department meetings, special education meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and faculty events. More to the point: It was something I needed to attend to within the District I&RS Task Force.

Cycle Two materialized as my personal aha moment. I began to understand how the need, in my district, to make the student learn – to fix the student – always becomes someone else's problem, but not a particular somebody's responsibility; that is, other than the student himself or the Child Study Team. This tenacious awareness provoked and



powered my actions to improve this organizational and educational practice and to inform my emerging and transforming leadership theory-in-use.

*Reflecting.* Prior to the second half of Cycle Two, the E.P.E.S. Teams were renamed and, in some forward-looking situations, reconfigured to be in compliance with the new I&RS philosophy and procedures. This was more than symbolic. The Task Force had risen above its near-ignominious beginnings. We grasped the opportunity to do different, to do smarter, and to do great. We stopped fawning over the former system for its paperwork efficiency in finding special needs children and we took the initial steps in closing the chapter on needing to move struggling learners away from the general education milieu in order to find or generate exceptional, or special, instruction.

The cycle took longer than expected. Although the administrative directive was to initiate training of each school-based I&RS team in September 2010, the roll-out across the district was delayed until the late-winter of 2011. Importantly, school faculty and I&RS Teams were kept informed of the Task Force's progress. The eventual approval of the Procedures Handbook by the Board of Education was marvelously received. Further, a presentation to New Jersey's Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC) team, on site for public school monitoring and evaluation, incited positive feedback and commendations. At the next faculty meeting at each school, the I&RS philosophy, scaffolding, and process were introduced to all staff. A natural consequence of the protracted development phase was the elimination (for purposes of this study) of more intensive and extensive professional development modules. For example, the Task Force postponed employing outside consultants to discuss multi-tiered instructional and support services, evocative coaching (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2010), and

appreciative inquiry (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cycle Two officially closed when all presentations and training programs were completed.

In reviewing my personal journal and reflecting upon my immunity-to-change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) exercise (see Appendix M), I stayed true to my visible commitment goal of not becoming the knight-in-shining-armor who creates and sustains organizational change only because of my personal efforts. I am proud of my democratic leadership that respected individuality, ensured that all voices were heard, and listened attentively to the ideas and opinions of others. Cycle Two required active member involvement, group decision-making, honest praise and criticism, and partnerships. Task Force members – and later, the I&RS Teams – needed to accept that they have the ability and responsibility to shape the culture, the organization, and the relationships of which they are a part. My leadership, fortified from a Structural Frame standpoint (Bolman & Deal, 2003), established supportive, nonjudgmental situations to work; broke down the hierarchies and, through restructuring, fostered better problem-solving; contributed to members developing a greater sense of trust in themselves and others; and resulted in a full public voice, solution, and product that benefits the school district's collective interests in its students and its teachers.

**Action Research Cycle Three.** Cycle Three covered the period of time from January 2011 to June 2011. I monitored closely the day-to-day operations of the fledgling I&RS Teams, including review of all team documents, agendas and minutes, and implemented I&RS action plans. I observed each team during a session and ensured completion of three meeting checklists (see Appendix D), by the researcher, an administrator or designee, and a teacher, for each observed meeting. In addition, I

communicated frequently with the school principals, the supervisor of the I&RS process, and each school's I&RS Team leader. I conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with each school principal, each I&RS Team leader, and teachers who had recently participated in an I&RS Team Meeting. At the personal request of the Assistant Superintendent, I ensured that Pre-referral Intervention Session Surveys (see Appendix E) were completed as follow-up to the ones done the previous year. Lastly, I presented a preliminary status report to the District Administrative Council on the functioning of the I&RS Teams.

*Planning.* During Cycle Three, I understood that the I&RS Teams were only recently trained in the new procedures, yet I anticipated their full awareness and application of our district's vision of assisting teachers to strengthen and augment their instructional practices. My logical next step was to get back into the schools, into the classrooms, and into the I&RS meetings and observe the progress. I expected to witness individualized action plans being developed by the I&RS Team. I imagined conversations among those educational specialists overflowing with strategies to correct the instructional mismatches between the current performances of that struggling student and of that challenged teacher. Further, I foresaw mental models and behaviors shifting away from exasperated staff thinking they must immediately pursue placement in a special education program (i.e., because the student cannot learn) to proactive and reassuring staff investigating how the student does learn, with the goal of informing the involved teacher's pedagogy and offering abundant instructional resources and support.

The major challenge was to complete the cycle before July, in order to capture this transitional and novel information while memories were fresh, interests were still

high, and momentum was yet to wane. Otherwise, staff would be less accessible over the summer, students would be assigned to different teachers or schools for the new school year, I&RS Teams might be staffed by different professionals, and new referrals to the I&RS process might not start for several months into the new year. In expedited fashion, I gathered information using meeting checklists, observational and field notes, informal conversations, a qualitative survey, and individual semi-structured interviews.

*Participants.* I joined each of the ten school's I&RS teams during one of their regularly scheduled meetings. I observed 85 participants (i.e., 16 general education/referring teachers; six special education teachers; 13 school counselors; five Child Study Team members; seven principals or designees; six school nurses; 11 parents; six literacy coordinators; three remedial instructors; five English as a Second Language [ESL] instructors; two Basic Skills teachers; one Speech-Language Specialist; one Student Assistance Coordinator; and three district supervisors) in 13 meetings. For the individual semi-structured interview sessions, 11 school administrators (principals and assistant principals), 10 I&RS Team leaders, and 16 teachers who had recently participated in an I&RS meeting participated in the conversations.

*Acting.* To complete the required interviews (and I&RS Team observations) in five weeks, my first step was to create a schedule and coordinate the sessions around the district. Although it necessitated much travel on my part, I found accommodating staff at their site of employment most effective in maximizing participation and lessening apprehension. At the onset of the interview, participants reviewed and signed an informed consent document (see Appendix J). Institutional Review Board compliance guidelines were followed. Participants were also provided with a copy of the I&RS Flowchart (see

Appendix I) as it appears in the District I&RS Procedures Handbook. Each interview was recorded using a pocket-sized camcorder with one-touch video-audio recording, except when technical difficulties forced me to take shorthand notes. For participants who preferred not to be recognized in the video, I turned the lens of the camcorder toward an object in the room. Each video was uploaded and stored on a secure computer. Later, data were transcribed and included with the observational or personal notes I jotted down.

For the I&RS Team meetings, I repeated my process of taking notes on how the event was conducted, who participated and who did not, what information was available, missing, and/or requested for discussion, and what actions were taken. I sought comparisons and contrasts between the previous E.P.E.S. model and the recently introduced I&RS model. As important as it was for me to allow the Team to progress through the recommended format and to comply with the flowchart of activities, I made notes in my leadership journal of the private challenges I faced to not interfere, to not distract, to not question, criticize or affect the conversations, and to not cheer too loudly.

*Instruments of Data Collection.* During Cycle Three, I again employed the observation checklist (see Appendix D) and the Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey (see Appendix E), this time, during the I&RS Team meetings. For the semi-structured interviews, questions (see Appendix K) were derived from the research questions, as well as from analyses of Cycle One and Cycle Two data. Additional probing questions were included, as needed, during the interview sessions.

*Observing.* With hundreds of hours of recorded video and audio data, I found myself confronted by a wonderfully good problem: a mountain of information. The events of Cycle Three happened very quickly, with key elements falling into place as

needed, as appropriate, as requested by staff, or as mandated by the I&RS process. The system did not need me to make it work. As my interpretive and data analyzing role in this action research project was peaking, I observed myself moving – maybe, reluctantly being pushed – to the sidelines of the schools as I&RS Teams got down to business. Moreover, the message was coming across loud-and-clear that the stories had changed; the conversations were becoming two-way, reflective, supportive, and rewarding; the relationships among staff seemed more trusting, open, honest, friendly, and appreciated; and the leadership for change was occurring on all levels. School principals were increasing their involvement in the operations of the I&RS Teams and ensuring the availability of ongoing professional development, proven teaching programs, and instructional resources and materials. Teachers were sharing effective strategies and techniques; they were opening the doors to their classrooms. The professionals on the I&RS Team were taking responsibility for quality instruction in their school. Moreover, in needing to understand the issue, to have those courageous conversations, and to make the tough decisions, members were striving to develop better listening skills, to find common ground, to agree on basics, to experiment and take healthy risks, and to value and trust their teaching skills. Data were telling me that the I&RS process was beginning to assist teachers to better serve our struggling learners.

**Reflecting.** Throughout this research project and most noticeably during Cycle Three, I set high expectations for myself, the staff, and this I&RS system. In part, I defined success in this venture as something we all would participate in, we all would accomplish, and we all would celebrate along the way. As one might consider a family, I found it easy to be concerned with staffs' well-being, their worries and fears, and their

need to be proud. Clearly, people are the heart of this school district. Championing the idea that any task in any organization can be stimulating and rewarding, I sought to merge my staffs' need to feel good about themselves with their ability to effectively get the job done. I was sensitive to staff feeling awkward, confused, powerless, or less than competent regarding this change and the new processes set into motion in such a short period of time. To balance this, I ensured that the I&RS scaffolding guaranteed training to develop new skills, empowerment to provide access to and use of these skills, and open, receptive communication within each school and throughout the district. Though my research intent was always to change the status quo of how pre-referral instruction teams did business, my leadership goal – to restructure the organization to meet the needs of the staff – endured.

At this time, I reflect upon how my comfortability as a servant leader greatly sustained me during Cycle Three. Further, as I approached my leadership from the point of view of a Human Resources framework (Bolman & Deal, 2003), I was successful because of my emphasis on relationships, the exchange of information, communication, empowerment, honesty and openness, and helping people to grow. As I noted in my immunity-to-change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) mapping (see Appendix M), I remained committed to sharing leadership and responsibilities at all levels in the school. I worked at better valuing a leadership spread throughout the organization and at better trusting that others will execute their duties with expertise, skills, and motivation necessary for success. Moreover, I was accepting that leadership is less the definition or property of an individual and more the contextual outcome of interactive, causal processes, and relationships. As I draw this study to a close, I am confident that my district's I&RS

process will continue to evolve to assist teachers and to meet the educational and behavioral needs of our students. As consequence to a need or maybe because of my example, staff are considering the opportunity for subsequent action research projects.

### **Educators Making a Road by Walking**

School administrators and teachers have many opportunities to consciously examine what they are learning from existing and lately implemented initiatives. In the case of the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.), this research study afforded the chance to appraise the accomplishments and disappointments of that system, to investigate what structures, commitments, assumptions, mindsets, behaviors, and expectations have supported these operations, and to initiate the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process as an experiment for change. Most school organizations detect issues or obstacles through single-loop learning (Argyris, 2008a) and tend to rely on current policies, past routines, or comfortable practices to make corrections. In contrast, double-loop learning (Argyris, 2008b; Collinson, 2006) ensures that any fault in the system is rectified in ways that involve the modification of the school's goals, policies, and standard operating procedures. Therefore, in comprehending our resistances and overcoming our personal defenses, we set aside old ways of thinking and then initiate movements that support transformational practices and effective leadership. Through double-loop learning, a learning organization creates a public and collective capacity to sense and interpret an evolving environment; to input new knowledge through life-long learning and continuous adjustment; to imbed this knowledge in systems and practices for change; and to transform this knowledge into radically different, smarter, and greater solutions.



This chapter provided an account of the research methodology that was utilized in this project. My action research study incorporated qualitative aspects, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry. I employed participant surveys, observational data, focus group information, informal and anecdotal discussions with involved stakeholders, checklists and other behavioral techniques, and individual interviews. Through my deliberate use of a planning-acting-observing-reflecting sequence of dialogue, I tried to provide a multi-sensory, multi-layered perspective of the spiraled, recursive, and winding road I walked to complete this project. Further, in using Argyris' (1990) work on organizational defenses and his double-looped learning theory, I described the framework that facilitated staff sharing their stories, opening the proverbial doors of their classrooms, trusting that something good would come of this effort, and addressing the beliefs and underlying assumptions relative to our district's use of a pre-referral instruction process.

**Bridge to Cycle One.** In the next three chapters, I will escort you – further and farther – along that road. With a vivid accompanying travel log, I will identify what we saw, what we heard, what it means, what we learned, and what we did next. While I trust that the information I have shared so far has more than suggested to you our direction, I discourage you from concluding that any preset destination has yet been reached – for me, this new I&RS process, our students, or our instructional staff. In an earlier exchange between travelers, Paulo (Horton & Freire, 1990) mused before Myles: “The question for me is how is it possible for us, in the process of making the road, to be clear and to clarify our *own* making of the road” (p 6-7). You will soon understand how the course of this journey was affected – and re-mapped – through continuous planning, acting, observing, and reflecting by all the participants involved. To the frustration of some, we discovered

there was no prescribed route. To the excitement of many, we experienced not only the communal sharing of our stories and our strategies, but also the sensation of being catalysts of school transformation. Through honest dialogue, trusting partnership, and reassuring strides, our path evolved, shifted, and adjusted to the terrain and climate within the boundaries of the Echgan Palaber School District.

## Chapter 5

### Cycle One Findings

Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change – personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive.

(Wheatley, 2002, p. 3)

“E.P.E.S. means nothing ...,” I started to say to members of the Administrative Council; but, again, my efforts to present the brutal facts (Collins, 2001) about our district’s pre-referral process were interrupted by a few principals. Despite their protests that I was criticizing a home-grown model that has served the district for many years and has been praised for its forms and agendas, I continued: “... nothing to improving student achievement and classroom instruction across our schools.” For this monthly meeting, I was permitted to provide a third installment of information intended to bring evidence, logic, and solid arguments to the discussion; to provoke questions; to drive for deep insight; and to find the best answers to support the implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) system. In sharing those voices from across the district, I conveyed a strategic vision I hoped would evoke my colleagues’ interests. The political practice has long been to accuse others or outside factors for delays and disasters, to hide or deny difficulties from those higher up on the chain-of-command, or to undermine the group’s decision after the fact. As Collins advises, I persevered to create a blameless and coercion-free climate where the truth can be heard and information cannot be ignored. Moreover, in striving for success for our schools, our teachers, and our students, I communicated clearly and chose my words, manners, and symbolism very carefully; and,

by being dependable and determined, I endeavored to build trust with my colleagues (Bennis & Nanus, 1997).

After my presentation, the Principal of the Lessing Elementary School triggered a subdued round of applause and, in leaning toward me, he acerbically prophesied, “you are trying to put a square apple in a round orange hole” (William Brown, personal communication, April 29, 2010). Impulsively, I considered agreeing with him. I thought to defuse the tension and the implied impossibility of the task. For a split-second, I imagined myself smiling, shrugging my shoulders, and saying: “Let’s give it a try and see what happens.” I did not. Time and breathing seemed to halt. I slowly scanned the room and realized for the first time in the past 17 minutes everyone was attending to me. Then it hit me: This is single-loop learning (Argyris, 2008a) and my colleagues were waiting for me to confirm that we were going to safeguard our old habits of doing things. The self-protection mechanisms – Argyris’ (1990) defensive reasoning and Kegan and Lahey’s (2009) immunity to change – were preparing to stall the transformation process. I contemplated: How do I provoke these leaders to recognize and interrupt this powerful inclination not to change? I knew that if we could hold ourselves to a higher standard and realize that even as adults we could grow and learn, we would find the courage to affect a caliber of change that is revitalizing and contagious.

I cracked the icy silence and addressed the Assistant Superintendent: “He’s correct; this district has never done anything this profound or important. Why can’t we get differentiated instruction right? How can we continue to abandon our challenged teachers? What are we doing in every classroom to ensure student success?” In pushing toward double-loop learning, I knew we would need to scrutinize the barebones

mechanisms through which we communicate, complain, make meaning, make mistakes, focus together on a common goal, share the work, construct organizational integrity, and celebrate accomplishments. We needed to start now. And, in accepting that sustainability in this endeavor would depend on many leaders, I recognized – and I believe our Assistant Superintendent recognized also – that a transforming leadership would affect many, not just the few and clearly not just me. After a succinct, head-on appraisal of the status of our pre-referral process, the Assistant Superintendent proposed the district’s development of the Intervention and Referral Service (I&RS) model that improves teaching and assists teachers. Although no motion was made and no approval was requested, the Administrative Council ceremoniously raised their hands as one.

Throughout this initial research cycle, I took action in collecting data to establish a baseline from which I would develop future cycles. As I reflected in the previous chapter, I risked taking on more than I could realistically manage and, therefore, needed to limit my scope to only the essential components of the project. Commencing during the pre-study data collection and extending into Cycle One, I openly shared the direction of the project and made sure educational staff were collectively involved in this change process at all levels, particularly from the bottom up. In gathering those stories, comments, beliefs, opinions, and ideas, I offered all stakeholders, including myself as research-participant, opportunities to investigate our theories-in-use through this action research paradigm (Fullan, 2007). As I highlight in this chapter the findings of this first cycle, I examine the major themes that emerged and offer insights into what was learned, why this is important, what the implications are, and what will need to be done next.

## Planning and Leading Change

Analysis of the preliminary data collected before Cycle One confirmed my impressions that the existing pre-referral process was not working as it was intended to, though most staff and administrators believed it functioned just fine in getting struggling students to the attention of the Child Study Team. Findings from the district-wide survey and the E.P.E.S. Team survey emphasized the lack of training regarding our pre-referral process as well as the breakdown and overall failure of this process to generate meaningful, responsive, and effective instruction within the general education setting. As my observations at E.P.E.S. meetings and my conversations with involved staff confirmed, the outcome of a referral to the E.P.E.S. Team rarely, if ever, resulted in a designed action plan of individualized instructional strategies for that teacher to deliver.

As mandated by the New Jersey Administrative Code (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.3[c]1.) –

When it is determined through analysis of relevant documentation and data concerning each intervention utilized that interventions in the general education program have not adequately addressed the educational difficulties, and it is believed that the student may have a disability, the student shall be referred for evaluation to determine eligibility for special education programs and services under this chapter. (p. 45)

Therefore, when an E.P.E.S. Team neglects, refuses, or otherwise fails to implement an action plan, but instead agrees with a teacher who states:

I have tried everything I know. Yes – I’ve done it all in the PRIM (i.e., the Pre-Referral Intervention Manual; McCarney, Wunderlich, & Bauer 1993). That’s it! There’s nothing more in me to give. It’s on you: I fail him and he stays back, or you get him to a special ed room; (Stewart Planter, E.P.E.S. meeting, October 14, 2010)

the Team has in effect concluded that the student is potentially disabled. As supervisor of special education, I have considered these behaviors, perceptions, mental models, beliefs, and words of my staff and they have informed the initial cycles of this study.

Unethical, immoral, and unprofessional. These are the adjectives I have occasionally and privately used to describe the actions of our E.P.E.S. Teams. Moreover, I could apply them to myself if I were to interfere with that team's referral of a student to the Child Study Team, regardless of the facts. Nevertheless, I have arranged meetings with the District Supervisor for E.P.E.S., the Principal, and the E.P.E.S. Team Leader. I have explained the New Jersey Administrative Code (N.J.A.C., 2007) for referral of a student to special education (6A:14-3.3c) and for the Intervention and Referral Services process (6A:16-8). I have directed them to reconvene a meeting of the E.P.E.S. Team. In effect, I have provided on-the-spot training to them. They took notes. Their heads nodded. They glanced at the clock. And, a knotted voice conveyed by their facial expressions seemed to groan: "...This is nerve-wracking since I don't know what I must pretend to know. Therefore, I pretend I know everything" (Laing, 1972, p. 17). All too often, I am asking them (i.e., administrators and teachers) to do something (e.g., adjusting teaching to meet the unique needs of a student via the unique abilities of a teacher) they do not know how to do (yet). These data inform my leadership.

From the data collected during the Cycle One focus group sessions, from feedback from administrators, teachers, and the larger educational community, and from observations of the E.P.E.S. Teams, at least nine major themes emerged from the coding and analysis. At this phase of the study, few presented any major revelations. Importantly though, I listened to the data and they informed the actions for Cycle Two. I was startled to hear from some instructional staff that they believe some students cannot learn. Moreover, I detected an undercurrent that many staff believe only a special education teacher can teach, may teach, or is effective in teaching a classified student with an

individualized education program (IEP). These pieces of information will need to be considered as biases or limitations and will need to be addressed in future professional development opportunities. To this point, I value the qualitative aspects of research for their complexity and variety of approach to data. Through this I am encouraged to interact deeply with the issues and to construct social processes in a reflective and informed manner (Glesne, 2006).

### **Listening to the Stories and the Dreams**

During Cycle One, I conducted four focus group sessions and observed 13 E.P.E.S. Team meetings. The focus group participants were true volunteers who clearly expressed the desire to be there. In general, the climate across gatherings tended to be casual yet energetic, opinion-oriented though not majority-rules, and emotion-filled but not rowdy. At the E.P.E.S. meetings, designated staff were required to attend and select members did the bulk of the talking. These were meetings. Although I did not present questions or interrupt the proceedings, staff would comment to me, ask questions about special education or the pre-referral process, seek my professional opinion, or explain – almost confess – why they said, did, or thought something. Interestingly, when I analyzed the research data, there were common themes across the meetings and the focus groups. Moreover, in both settings, staff were inclined to thank me, sincerely, for participating. Spurred by my curiosity, I asked a teacher and she said: “We see supervisors when they do walk-throughs, staff evaluations. You being here? Tells me somebody cares. You got out of your office. You’re bringing-it; trying to make a difference. I want more of that” (Budd Jataka, focus group, June 8, 2010).



In some cases, these professionals wanted me to understand how hard they work and how proud they are of themselves and of all the teachers in the district. At times, I got the impression they wanted to hear how I was going to improve or fix special education. Frequently, they wanted to tell me what was wrong with the district, and they weren't reluctant to fire some suggestions at me or suggest some firings to me. The emotions of anger and fear seemed omnipresent – just below the surface – and staff could readily shift between the two. They were equally frustrated with parents who sent children to school unprepared, unfed, and unsupported and with administrators who introduced initiatives without training, resources, or funding. These research-participants shouted. They cried. Most importantly they wanted to be heard. I listened and I learned. Their message was a plea for assistance, assurance, guidance, and clarification. They wanted to be a part of the solution. They did not want to be identified as the reason why students are not learning in the Echgan Palaber Public Schools. When a new plan is launched, they want to see the leadership – that is, who is being responsible for the initiative – and they want a clear plan, an easily understood how-to list, an expectation, a way to measure the progress, a finish-line, a way to correct the missteps, and a way to celebrate the successes. The themes that emerged from the data coding and analysis underscored these beliefs, demands, and dreams.

**E.P.E.S. Helps Teachers.** Although I have been a forthright critic of how E.P.E.S. conducts business in my district, I was reminded by instructional staff that the vision and potential still exists for this pre-referral process to offer services and resources to our teachers. Further, there is the tacit reassurance that teachers are not holding back

their greatest strategies, but are open-minded to learning and trying proven techniques and what really works. One staff commented:

I know people say bad things about how E.P.E.S. meetings run, but I believe if that teacher lucks-out and gets a school counselor who listens and tries to understand what's going on with that student, then something good can happen. The teacher wants what's best for the student and the teacher wants to say she made a difference. (Mitra Bheda, focus group, June 8, 2010)

Continuing on that theme of seeking what is best for a student, these teachers recognized that asking for assistance is a far better alternative than doing nothing:

If it weren't for E.P.E.S., some teachers would quit. It's like light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel when you are not getting through to a kid. E.P.E.S. lets the teacher hear: 'We understand. This kid is really struggling. You've tried everything. Take a break.' E.P.E.S. makes it alright to say you need help. (Lowrence Fox, focus group, May 20, 2010)

When a new teacher doesn't know what to do with a kid who is having a rough time in the classroom, E.P.E.S. is a great place for that teacher to get suggestions. Maybe there is something she didn't think about. Maybe she can get her hands on better reading programs or literacy plans, even lesson plans, or groupings of kids, or co-teaching in the room. If special education is not the way to go, then that teacher might change-up how she is teaching. (Pam Philomel, focus group, May 13, 2010)

Within this theme of a pre-referral process offering the teacher information on a student's learning style, areas of ability, and perhaps competencies, several teachers acknowledged and articulated how this information could inform their teaching without having to send the student to another teacher:

I try to think of E.P.E.S. as something other than a special education meetings; I can't. I guess, maybe after Child Study finishes the testing, maybe if they share the report with the teacher, that teacher can try to teach in a different way, maybe to the student's skills or what he knows or how he learns. Maybe E.P.E.S. shouldn't send the student off to special education until AFTER the E.P.E.S. Team makes their plan work. (Mary Mawkin, focus group, May 11, 2010)

I think E.P.E.S. should be for every student – not just the ones on their way for special education. Teachers need a good place to run-by ideas, to come up with new ideas, to see if a teaching plan might work. And I don't think only teachers

need this kind of group. Special education teachers could get some help at E.P.E.S. meetings. I don't often see special education teachers asking for help. (Istina Dalamtia, focus group, May 20, 2010)

**E.P.E.S. Classifies.** The vast majority of participants in this research study concluded that this district's pre-referral process is a one-way street to a special education placement. As one teacher stated, "I never really thought about the E.P.E.S. Team as being anything other than the start of putting a student in special education" (Mary Tomelise, focus group, May 20, 2010). In less-than-pedagogic tones, another teacher brazenly reported: "To get a kid who's not learning out of your classroom you do the E.P.E.S. paperwork and give it to the school counselor" (Karen Redd, focus group, May 11, 2010). Savvy staff who know how to navigate the political waters exclaimed: "It's simple, people! There are two ways to get a kid into special education: have the parent write a letter or you send the kid to the E.P.E.S. Team and they get the testing done" (Divine Pike, focus group, May 20, 2010). Critically, this is not to say that classification is a negative outcome; only that the pre-referral process is not intended to be so limiting or restraining in its scope. In highlighting this narrow path of E.P.E.S. options (and ignoring the expanse of resources that could be offered to the concerned teacher), this staff noted:

A teacher can't go right to the child study team and get the kid tested. You have to get all the forms filled out first. The E.P.E.S. team makes sure it's ready. There is a waiting list for the testing to be done. (Robene Sheperd, focus group, May 11, 2010)

From E.P.E.S. to the Child Study Team, most teachers commented on the predictable routine and the relative absence of any other essential options: "The E.P.E.S. Team makes sure things aren't rushed. The teacher fills out the forms. The parent signs and the

team does testing and writes reports. When the student gets an IEP, then he goes into a remedial classroom” (Charity Nave, focus group, June 8, 2010).

**Unclear E.P.E.S. Team Functions and Responsibilities.** From its peculiar but pronounceable acronym, the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (i.e., “eh-PIS”) represents the district’s frequently misunderstood, poorly executed, and sadly enigmatic pre-referral process. As described by one teacher:

It’s kinda mysterious ... E.P.E.S. I have worked in the district for years. I couldn’t tell you what happens at a meeting. When I did refer a student once – and he was special ed – I couldn’t get a sub [to free me from class] to go. The kid was tested – I guess – and then one day he was pulled from my room. (Pisma Budim, focus group, May 20, 2010)

Nevertheless, even for those staff who have participated in the E.P.E.S. meetings, there remains a confusion regarding who oversees the event. One teacher indicated: “I thought the principal is in charge of E.P.E.S” (King Log, focus group, May 20, 2010); and another noted: “I heard that the school counselor runs the meeting; but, it’s really the principal who decides what happens next. The Child Study person just gets the paperwork at the end” (Fam Laws, focus group, June 8, 2010).

In addition to absent leadership and gaps in the procedures, other criticisms about E.P.E.S. include the one-size-fit-all suggestions or the impractical recommendations. With more than a nod to the ritualistic or symbolic aspects of the process, a teacher explained:

Sometimes at an E.P.E.S. meeting we list all the things that might help a student in the classroom. We don’t always try them all; some are ... not real, or not ... helpful, like a math-buddy or giving the kid some other student’s class notes. And, I don’t think that’s fair to everyone else. But – the list isn’t really helpful, you know, to me – the teacher – or to the kid. It’s really to show the school tried something. (Gord Ladeis, focus group, May 11, 2010)

Another teacher alluded to the potential benefits of recommendations in an action plan, but could not realistically comprehend who would deliver these interventions or supports:

I know in some schools, a teacher might be assigned a teacher-mentor or consultant who can give suggestions on how to teach a student. I'd like that to happen here. Couldn't tell you who they'd hire to do that. I never see the child study team people and the other teachers have no time. (Marn Piroutte, focus group, May 11, 2010)

**No Partnerships, No Teamwork.** Another recurring theme was the relative aloneness and isolation of teachers within the schools. Though one teacher reflected positively on the presence of a professional learning community (PLC) in her building, the opportunity to engage in a collaborative work session does not seem available:

I like the PLC in my school. I wish there was a time in the day when I could sit in someone else's class – or they could sit in mine and then later we could just talk about it; you know, what happened, what didn't, what worked, what we could have tried. And then we write our lesson plans together. Maybe work with a supervisor or a literacy coordinator or ... even a E.P.E.S. or child study person. (Nathan Wise, focus group, May 11, 2010)

One teacher emphasized and yearned for the potential partnership of working with a specialist in her classroom to strengthen her teaching:

When the learning specialist comes to test a student, it's all about that kid. I mean, she checks what he doesn't know and then tells me what he doesn't know. I knew THAT from the start. Maybe if she co-taught a class with me, she could see how things are going, I mean, the teaching. (Jules Cigale, focus group, May 20, 2010)

The implication is rather than finding another classroom – or another teacher – maybe the best strategy would be to fortify the instructional practices in the familiar setting for that student. This co-teaching could be a recommendation in an E.P.E.S. action plan. Another teacher was even more emphatic:

If I go to E.P.E.S. and ask for help and they tell me, 'Try something else,' that's ridiculous! They should just tell me, 'no.' And if they classify the student, it just makes me feel like I failed as a teacher. I couldn't get through to that student, 'Try again next time!' It's backwards. I want E.P.E.S. to work with me. Tell me

something that works with that kind of learner. Is that so crazy? (Winnifred Begone, focus group, May 11, 2010)

Further stressing the lack of people working together, some staff recognized the breakdown in teamwork and partnerships during the E.P.E.S. meeting, perhaps in front of the parent:

E.P.E.S. is set up so there is like a line down the middle of the room. You don't want to be on the other side of that line. First, you get a sense of how serious the teacher is to get the student classified. Who's on her side? If the teacher convinces the parent, then there is more on her side. When the principal picks the teacher's side, then it is just about over. The school social worker doesn't usually say much until it comes down to just taking the referral and starting the evaluations. The school counselor just takes notes. It's not people working together, it's picking-sides and then pushing the problem to someone else. (Louise Poesie, focus group, May 13, 2010)

Clearly thinking outside-the-box (and picking up on my belief that teachers need to be special and teaching needs to be exceptional for all students), this teacher presented a vision for a classroom of the future:

I don't see the supervisors working together. The principal runs the building and calls the shots. There is a school building in this district where the special education students are bussed to another school. I don't know why. But think about it: That's power! I bet that special education supervisor has nothing to say about that. I know we can't have a 'special education school,' but who's to say we can't have a school where, like, every classroom's got a teacher, specialists, aides, and administrators who make sure there are materials – the right materials, technology, books – and they have small groups based on how each student understands, how they learn the material. That's SPECIAL education; right? (Tony Camel, focus group, May 13, 2010)

**Not Enough Training.** Earlier in this document I reflected how teachers might not know or not be competent to do what is expected of them when it comes to teaching a student of unique abilities and needs. While this limitation would have a profound impact on that student, there would be a day-to-day psychological cost to the teacher's self-efficacy and confidence. Most staff commented on the absence of pre-service and on-

going professional development regarding the pre-referral process and cutting-edge instructional practices. One survivalist teacher painted a bleak picture of the classrooms in her school:

Most teachers don't know what the E.P.E.S. Team does. I think most don't even use E.P.E.S. A teacher does what she's got to do to get through the lesson and the marking period. It'd be great to have someone lend a hand, but – that's my room ... and those're my kids. (Mary Mawkin, focus group, May 11, 2010)

Other teachers seemed to question the point of E.P.E.S. training for the schools, as the process seems to have little to do with improving a teacher's skills:

You don't get training for E.P.E.S. There are certain people that have to be on the team. That's it. They know what forms, I guess, have to be filled out and filed. (Val Ladolid, focus group, June 8, 2010)

What would you train the E.P.E.S. people in? They go to the meeting and listen to see if the student can go to special ed. Maybe, we don't need so many at the meeting for that. Maybe, they could find a way to get the parent more involved. Some problems start at home. Parents could stay on the kids about homework, going to school. (Ibn Dimna, focus group, June 8, 2010)

We get training on hundreds of stuff. What's new? What's in fashion? Good teaching is always in style. Some teachers have a hard time, but we all figure it out. I'll tell you – I'd be sitting in the front row if there was a PD [professional development day] on classroom management and that presenter actually showed a video of her in action, and it works. (Minna Barnhelm, focus group, May 13, 2010)

While some staff were more tactful than others, the recommendations from the majority of teachers called for better training of E.P.E.S. Team members:

E.P.E.S. would be awesome if someone actually gave me suggestions that worked! Come on! Tell me to have the kid sit in the front; what's that all about? Or, if I photocopy worksheets on different colored pages; OK. And, send the parent an email every afternoon and tell her what her child did or didn't do; yeah, I have time for that! (Beatrice Satyr, focus group, June 8, 2010)

**E.P.E.S. Leadership is Lacking.** Collins (2001) suggested that effective leadership involves making sure the right people are on the bus, those people are in the right seats, and the wrong people are not on the bus. What if there is no bus? The bus is in the shop? Or, what if there was no one competent to drive the bus? Or, to give directions? As if this next teacher anticipated my use of a transportation metaphor:

E.P.E.S. is like ... public transportation: It's always running. If you need it, you get on; if you don't, well then you might not even know it's there. It's a good thing; but, maybe not for everyone. I think the principal of each school makes it great or ... makes it 'not there.' Principals should know what teaching is going on in their building. If teachers need help, the principal should bring in training and resources. E.P.E.S. is something the principals have; they could run it differently. Yeah – it seems to work OK to get a kid into special education, but what if the E.P.E.S. team were teaching experts. That's a scary thought: This team could 'tune-up' a classroom or the teacher or a kid who's having a hard time. Principals should think about this. (Robene Sheperd, focus group, May 11, 2010)

Another teacher was more direct with her identification of absent leadership: “My principal doesn't go to E.P.E.S. meetings. Not unless there's going to be a problem” (Gord Ladeis, focus group, May 11, 2010). This professional highlighted the political implications of having a high ranking administrator in the special education department overseeing the pre-referral process:

It is wrong to me that E.P.E.S. in this district has always been overseen by the Assistant Superintendent of Special Education. The supervisor in charge is really in charge of the guidance department, but she still answers to a special education boss. I think this is a chain of command problem. This is self-serving. E.P.E.S. is supposed to serve the kids, yet it answers to special education; it's controlled by special education. I see where parents and teachers have a problem with who is 'letting kids into' special education. (Pathak Legend, focus group, June 8, 2010)

In optimistic tones, the following teachers captured the excitement and potential that might exist if a competent pre-referral process, with effective leadership, was available in each school:



It is a great idea to take a look at how E.P.E.S. is working. I think there are some problems. But with better leadership, E.P.E.S. can be better run. I know I would use it, not to classify a student, but to help me get connected with stronger teaching and new teaching methods and materials, with people in the field who do professional development. I just don't want my principal or fellow teachers thinking I can't teach. Asking for help should be a good thing. (Georg Joakima, focus group, May 20, 2010)

Some people tell you they are going to help you, but what they do just makes you 'fess-up to what you can't do. I hate that. I like the idea of sharing things that work. 'Hey! Check this out; and it does a great job! Want to use it?' If you see a need for it, you try it. Maybe it becomes something you use, maybe not. You put it in your closet; so to speak. You have shelves of things that work, and you share them with all the teachers in your building. The things that don't work? Chuck'em! You don't need to keep storing junk. Nobody wants them; that's why YOU have them. I think if you want to help somebody, HELP THEM. Share. Be honest, be positive. (Florence Petit, focus group, May 13, 2010)

**The Process is Done to Students.** This research category was created when two others were collapsed; neither inferred that E.P.E.S. was a process to assist teachers or improve instructional practices. The implication was that the teacher was irrelevant to the process. One teacher said it most directly:

There's teaching and then there's learning. The teacher knows what to do. That kid who doesn't come to school, doesn't do homework, starts fights, bullies, just ... is not learning. Then, something's got to be done. No teacher should have to put up with that. (Anth Lender, focus group, May 11, 2010)

However, it was the professional sitting beside her at the focus group session at Anderson High School who added the exclamation point by saying: "E.P.E.S. gets a child into special education" (Joan Erudices, focus group, May 11, 2010).

Regarding a slightly different point of view for this theme, some teachers suggested an inevitability that struggling students can only be instructed in a special education setting. Without implying any responsibility on the part of the teacher to differentiate instruction or offer innovative educational outreach to the student, this professional lamented: "It's a shame kids get disabilities. E.P.E.S. makes sure those kids

and their parents don't fall between the cracks. If it weren't for E.P.E.S., some kids would be stuck in the back of a classroom or dropping out" (Emily Galotti, focus group, May 11, 2010). Another teacher recognized that a pre-referral process offers help, but not in her classroom:

E.P.E.S. gives the school a chance to talk about the kid who's failing or not doing well. If there is something to be tried, then the kid might start to plug in or get work done or feel a part of the learning. But if the kid is just not learning then ... he needs something else. (Millie Favole, focus group, May 13, 2010)

Lastly, this omnipotent teacher suggested that E.P.E.S. is unnecessary as the teacher could just as easily refer the student directly to the Child Study Team:

I don't understand why there are regular meetings of E.P.E.S.. It should really be the teacher telling the parent her child needs to be checked out by Child Study. Then the parent can meet with Child Study. All the paperwork is done behind the scenes. (Karen Redd, focus group, May 11, 2010)

**Special Education is Being-In-The-Club.** During this cycle, research participants expressed the recurrent themes of a homogenous special education population; of the age-old misunderstanding that special education is a place, not a service; and of special education teachers being the only instructors capable of teaching classified students:

Once a child is classified, they carry that with them forever. Teachers look at him differently. He needs to be taught differently; there's an IEP that says so. Once a student is in special education, they never come out. How can they? (Anth Lender, focus group, May 11, 2010)

Although there is an implied us-them perspective, many teachers acknowledged that the instructional programs within a special education program are intensive and individualized for that student. One professional noted: "I think the special education program in my school is great. Every student – even the normal ones – should be taught by these teachers. I get why kids stay in special education until they graduate" (Alava

Laguardia, focus group, May 13, 2010). Further, other teachers inferred that where the general education setting may be limited by the mandated curriculum, the expertise of the instructor, the textbooks and resources, or the learning pace of the students, this cannot be the case in an educational setting defined by a student's individualized education program (IEP): "I know once a student gets into special education, they have to do everything possible to make him learn" (Winnifred Begone, focus group, May 11, 2010). This statement begs for an explanation as to why all teachers are not held to doing "everything possible."

To a similar refrain, some teachers implied that the uniqueness of a student's learning style – call it a giftedness, a disability, or not-like-the-others – automatically or inherently interferes with learning or success in the typical educational environment. As one teacher advertised: "That's why there are Asperger schools and schools for the gifted; those kids learn better there. I don't teach like that" (Tim Fabulas, E.P.E.S. meeting, April 14, 2010)! Being different or learning differently means the student cannot be here with everyone else; the student needs to be matched with apposite teaching. Nevertheless, while most teachers acknowledged the challenges and frustrations presented by a learning disability, there were some who failed to recognize that they could adapt or develop innovative teaching styles:

Disabilities don't go away. Kids should be classified as soon as possible so you can start working on bringing that kid up. Start in Kindergarten ... or earlier ... and give him programs that work, for him. Teach reading until he's got it; then everything flows smoother. But you can't say you cured the disability. (Millie Favole, focus group, May 13, 2010)

And this teacher, at least, seemed to notice how removal from the mainstream created other – perhaps, unnecessary – social issues for students:

I have students in my homeroom; start the day just like everybody else. No differences; I mean, I don't see them. The students get pulled-out all morning for language arts literacy, math, science, counseling, social studies, speech. Then, the students are all together for lunch, but that special ed student is off by himself. He's not one-of-the-group. Then, he comes back at the end of the day. Tries to be part of the conversations. He – this particular student I am thinking about – is quiet, to himself; he packs up his stuff and goes home. Sad. Right? (Marlene Etika, focus group, May 20, 2010)

**Some Students Cannot Learn.** This theme proved to be the most distressing for me and the one that spoke most directly to the mental models and stories staff maintain to justify why students struggle in a classroom. To utter this theme outloud is wrong on so many levels. Further, it makes clear that some educators have lost perspective on the mission of schools and of teaching: “If there's that child in your room and ... he is doing nothing; he don't belong there” (Jenny Lind, focus group, May 11, 2010). Another teacher indicated: “When there are 24 students in a room, there's bound to be someone who don't get it! That's why there's special ed. It's not my place to hold that kid back” (Alex Penaflorida, focus group, June 8, 2010). Many professionals avoided responsibility to improve their pedagogy by concluding that a special education placement is a solution:

Special Education is a good thing. I don't know if changing E.P.E.S. or taking it away is the right thing. E.P.E.S. gets those students to better trained teachers. There are kids that just don't learn like the others. They slow the group down and ... then behaviors start. (Emily Galotti, focus group, May 11, 2010)

I think some children get promoted because that's what the teacher's got to do. When a kid stays-back, it looks bad on the school. The State is watching everything. Keeping-back kids makes problems. Pushing them kids ahead makes bigger problems because that next teacher or the next or the ... high school teacher ... is gonna have their hands full. A kid in 10<sup>th</sup> grade who never learned to read. Are you kidding me?! (Joan Erudices, focus group, May 11, 2010)

### **Unpacking the Get-togethers**

At the core of this action research study were the opportunities to appraise the accomplishments and disappointments of the Echgan Palaber School District's

longstanding pre-referral process, to investigate what structures, commitments, assumptions, mindsets, behaviors, and expectations have supported these operations, and to initiate the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model as an experiment for change. If the educational community were to commit to improving teaching to meet the needs of our diverse student population, we would need meaningful school reform with transforming leadership, innovative vision, and conversations among teachers. During Cycle One, the focus group sessions opened lines of communications, setting a high priority for honest dialogue and the sharing of stories, among staff directly involved with our students. Furthering Sergiovanni's (1996) emphasis on recognizing individuality among teachers, the staff get-togethers encouraged educators to reflect on their own practices, stimulated caring communities, rekindled a trust among all professionals, laid the groundwork for collaborative learning among teachers, and called upon all educators to respond morally to their work. From these stories emerged the themes and theories of what the staff see and do; that is, what they experience as real, important, and necessary for our schools. In unpacking these findings, I recognize how the next cycle will be need to be influenced less by managerial demand and more by what these teachers believe, by what their colleagues believe and do, and by the unique cultural aspects of this district.

If the dozens of hours of transcription for Cycle One were to be condensed to one paragraph, this teacher captured the frustration and challenge most articulately:

I know everybody can learn. That's why I am a teacher. But, I don't know everything. I mean, some kids have real serious problems. I can't deal with that. There is a special education teacher out there who got training on all that; not me! If I spend hours with one student that means there are 18 other students not getting taught. (Jay Woodman, focus group, May 20, 2010)

In leading the chorus of voices, the preeminent themes of this cycle made it loud and clear to the District I&RS Task Force that our future pre-referral process will require leadership, vision, procedures, training, team competencies, and oversight.

Through my use of a qualitative design, I went beyond the statistics and the levels of confidence to draw out the voices of the educational community and to truly understand the stories. I noticed that the aim of my inquiry and of my research questions emerged from a convergence of two perspectives: science and practice. The curricular-rich and instructional-precise work of teachers and the everyday teaching brought me to a crossroads where those two spheres of action meet, interact, and develop an understanding of each other. Within an action research process and within the natural environment of the educators where I work, the science and the practice introduced their own perspective; namely, the way educators walk the path to student achievement. During Cycle One, I witnessed how this participatory research process enabled the educational community – my co-researchers – to cognitively and emotionally step back from their day-to-day, their familiar routines, their established relationships, and their organizational hierarchy in order to fundamentally question and reflect on the what they do, and why. By embracing narrative as “both phenomena under study *and* method of study” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4), this qualitative aspect of the research design, at some point, brought all participants – including myself – to negotiate with the stifling inertia created by our powerful inclination not to change.

### **Leadership: Checking the Gauges**

As I progressed through the planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages of Cycle One, I frequently referenced Burns’ (1978) concepts that leadership must be

aligned with a collective purpose and that an effective leader will be judged by his ability to make social changes. I employed the focus group sessions, as well as the Administrative Council meetings, to increase awareness about important issues in our schools and to obtain support for an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process. In considering, appreciating, and treating each member of the organization as an individual, while also symbolically uniting the educational community, I concentrated on inspiring my fellow educators to identify with a teacher-assisting vision that reached beyond their immediate self-interests. In embracing the “supreme and enduring principals of a people” (Burns, 2003, p. 29) and building “enduring greatness” (Collins, 2001, p. 20), I made connections and pathways – literally and figuratively – throughout my school district by fostering partnerships, welcoming conversations, displaying a sense of mission and confidence, increasing optimism, nurturing enthusiasm, and earning respect, loyalty, and trust. As Collins anticipated, the findings of this cycle confirmed that no coercion, blaming, or motivation was needed. Staff impressed with a receptivity to deliver stronger teaching. I successfully provided the opportunities for educators to be heard and for the information not to be ignored. Most critically, in attending to the message that leadership is a learning process, I accepted that I would need to continue to transform and mature.

### **Open the Doors of the Classrooms**

If you were to walk down the second floor hallway of Krylov Primary School on a June afternoon, you would notice that all the classroom doors are closed. The nearing-retirement building is not air-conditioned and the windows, in the stairwells at the distant ends of the hall, are paint-stuck secured. The heat is oppressive. As you approach the formidable dark oak door of room 209, you recognize the teacher’s name carved in the

cultured millwork below the sealed transom. The poster on the inside of the window prevents you from seeing the 21 students seated in four rows of desks, and the drone of an unseen floor fan deadens the instructor's lesson from getting out. The patrolling safety officer believes the unopen rooms maintain order and keep students in line. But he doesn't close the doors, the teachers do; and teachers have done this for decades. Though nature may abhor a vacuum, most teachers have preferred a closed classroom.

Broadly speaking, there persists within the educational community the image of teaching as a solitary activity, personally owned by each teacher. Much like her classroom, her desk, and her seat in the faculty lounge, the teacher's instructional practices are viewed as acquired or invented and then refined over a tenured career. Fiercely possessive and cagily private, teachers safeguard treasured texts, worksheets, and lesson plans. The quality and success of her craft and courses are considered to be the result of that teacher doing her job behind the classroom door. By convention, principals have kept their distance, not wanting to interfere with the good teaching they believed to be idiosyncratic and largely dependent on that teacher's style and personality. As a result, school leaders sought better teachers to improve teaching. Contemporary thinking suggests the opposite. Rather than posting for the exemplary teacher to guarantee student achievement, principals need to invite ordinary teachers to accept the responsibility of improving not only their own techniques, but also the shared instructional practices of their profession. Teaching needs to be open to collective observations, study, discussions, interpretations, and improvement. This process starts when the educational community learns to analyze the happenings and specifics of ordinary classroom instruction, with all its day-to-day competencies and imperfections, and then learns to see more effective



ways of teaching. As the culture changes, school leaders, educators, parents, and policymakers will need to expand strategies to listen to, support, respect, empower, and reinforce teachers brave enough to open their classroom doors. I now know a few fearless Echgan Palaber teachers who let revitalizing breezes of instruction swirl into the hallway.

Maybe the temperature in those hallways was responsible for the unfreezing. Instead, I believe the honest conversations and the renewed relationships cultivated the conditions for change. Cycle Two was willed into motion. Being listened to and listening to others proved to me to have an almost magical effect on our professionals. Educators held issues, obstacles, and decisions at arms-length. They examined them from all sides and then passed them around the room. And instead of offering quick opinions or ready solutions and then racing off to the next crisis, they wanted to talk more, plan more, and do more to teach greater. The nine themes that emerged in this cycle – E.P.E.S. Helps Teachers; E.P.E.S. Classifies; Unclear E.P.E.S. Team Functions and Responsibilities; No Partnerships, No Teamwork; Not Enough Training; E.P.E.S. Leadership is Lacking; The Process is Done to Students; Special Education is Being-In-The-Club; and Some Students Cannot Learn – informed the essential components: Leadership, Vision, Procedures, Training, Team Competencies, and Oversight, for the development of the district’s intervention and referral services (I&RS) process. The educators came alive.

**Bridge to Cycle Two.** The events of Cycle Two impatiently wait on the turn of this page. In preparing you to comprehend that period of time from the first meeting of the District I&RS Task Force to the last training session of the school-based I&RS Teams, I would want you to imagine the experience as akin to crossing a multi-lane superhighway in fast-moving traffic: just you and a united group of pedestrians, with no

crosswalk, no stoplight, and yet the urgency, sacrifice, courage, vision, and commitment to get to the other side. Sometimes we dodged and ran; other times we waited ... and waited. No other cycle of this study offered the spiraling sensorium of exhilarating, frustrating, frightening, laborious, tedious, nail-biting, head-pounding, foot-stomping, and awe-inspiring undertakings. There was no turning back. And, in no other cycle was my leadership theory-in-use more challenged. Through the process of designing our I&RS model, the educational community witnessed their thoughts put into action.

## Chapter 6

### Cycle Two Findings

If the artist does not perfect a new vision in his process of doing, he acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind.  
(Dewey, 1934, p. 50)

When the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.) was first established years ago, I am confident that the responsible supervisor believed the school district was now doing things right. In using forms recommended by the New Jersey Department of Education, vetted by the board solicitor, and sanctioned by the special education department, there must have been a surge in pride and satisfaction across administrative ranks. For these emotions to trickle down into the schools, staff must have been more than reassured that a regularly-meeting, teacher-responsive, school-based team was at-the-ready for struggling students. However, E.P.E.S. did not operate as an instructional or intervention model. For example, there were no assessments of student or teacher performances, no action plans, no deployment of reading programs or behavioral management systems, no teacher training programs, and no classroom-based assistance for teachers. Why then was it praised – from parent to principal, and from teacher to board member – as an efficient mechanism and resource for teachers? An historian of science once disclosed that “the study of error provides a particularly fruitful pathway to understanding human thought. Truth just is, but error must have reasons” (Gould, 1998, p. 342). I imagine that in the absence of a long-ago district roll-out that could have included a vision, initial and ongoing staff training, access to resources, school oversight, administrative monitoring, and a bottom-to-top feedback loop – but did not – E.P.E.S.

quickly devolved into a means through which a student was placed in a special education classroom; nothing more. And, teachers expected nothing more (or less) especially when they were lead to believe that the next action would come from the Child Study Team.

In the preceding chapter, we heard the voices of many teachers sharing their impressions of our district's pre-referral program, as well as its notable disconnect with student achievement and with services within the schools. As this was the only model most Echgan Palaber staff ever knew, E.P.E.S., for the most part, represented the result of a single experiment. Why would a teacher expect – or tolerate – any other outcome? If the professional (Karen Redd, focus group, May 11, 2010) believes, “To get a kid who's not learning out of your classroom you do the E.P.E.S. paperwork and give it to the school counselor,” what possibility is there that this teacher would be receptive to novel instructional strategies, from peers, reflective of the way that student learns? Here is the false argument that E.P.E.S. works, and the crucial – and equally flawed – inference that completed applications result in the successful conclusion of a procedure. A critical paradigm shift is needed. The mental model must be replaced. Under E.P.E.S., no teacher would be expected to willingly open their classroom door, consider their instructional practices, seek specialized professional development, accept the challenge to teach differently – that is, the way the student learns – and adjust her subsequent efforts to foster incremental student growth. I am reminded that experimental science requires repetition to test the probability of outcomes. We desperately need such a re-action in order to make a judgment on this district's capacity to implement a pre-referral model. This intervention and referral services (I&RS) process represents that second experiment.

## **Acting to Generate Organizational Change**

The District I&RS Task Force approached its assignment reluctantly. The simple name change suggestion was dismissed without much discussion; however, the daunting expectation of developing, presenting, and implementing a revised pre-referral process within three months generated anxiety and disagreement among the six school leaders. Initially, members struggled with the vision. Not that they refuted the inadequacies of the current process, the majority was hesitant to dismantle a procedural mechanism of the special education department. The political implications were palpable during the Task Force planning session. As I noted in Chapter 4, each member was provided a binder of information and resources, especially sample pre-referral models from across the country and throughout New Jersey. Although the composition of the Task Force may not have been the optimal representation of the right people on the bus (Collins, 2001), I recognized our individual skills and started linking a member to each of the programmatic components we would be developing for the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model: leadership, vision, training, team competencies, procedures, and oversight. In addition to making each member responsible for developing that particular section, I structured the operations of the Task Force using the same components. Despite my status as the least senior administrator on the Task Force, members responded positively to my team-building exercises, delegation of authority, task-orientation, attention-to-details, optimism, enthusiasm, energy, and commitment. My democratic leadership was engaged.

In addressing vision, training, and the skill sets, or competencies, of the Task Force, I conducted brief and explanatory presentations on many of the topics covered in

Chapter 3. Moreover, I invited specialists in the field to meet with our group, provided contact information so Task Force members could reach out to key professionals, and offered research articles, magazines, texts, and internet sites for more comprehensive inquiries. Although the Task Force would meet several times as a group, much of the work was performed individually or in small groups. However, before moving forward from the planning session, we needed to clarify the vision for the Task Force and for this pre-referral process. As I summarized and then outlined distinctions between the New Jersey Administrative Code requirements for referral to special education and for the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process, members were astonished that the guidelines were not one and the same. This was a tipping point and effectively ended the argument that any pre-referral process – E.P.E.S. or I&RS – is a special education device. With this perceived liability or noncompliance vacated, the Task Force was liberated to imagine the potential of an I&RS model overseen by instructional leadership and committed to assisting teachers, developing educational programs, and strengthening teaching practices. A vision was unanimously approved:

Engaging and effective classrooms – for students and teachers alike – make the teaching-learning continuum both dynamic and satisfying. However, constantly evolving social conditions and the changing educational needs that tend to emerge with these changes can pose dramatic barriers to student achievement. The teacher who requires further assistance may turn to the well-coordinated system of our district I&RS process. (E.P.S.D. Procedure Handbook, 2010, p. 19)

As members acclimated to the role each would serve on the Task Force, the procedures for how we would proceed started to emerge. In line with our overarching vision, each administrator defined the purpose of their section in the manual and then created an outline. This formatting contributed to the development of our agendas and structured our subsequent conversations and actions. As the de facto leader of the Task

Force, but clearly second chair to the Assistant Superintendent, I provided oversight by facilitating our discussions; recording minutes of our meetings; compiling resources and materials; typing and collating the developing manual; scheduling meetings, observations, trainings, and other events; and serving as an unwavering task-master. Despite the efficiency of our shared leadership, collaboration, and efforts, we struggled with satisfying our deadlines, reconvening at critical opportunities, and reaching consensus on essential components of the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) proposal. Task Force members realized that several phases would be required to roll-out a comprehensive I&RS model, including specialized trainings (e.g., appreciative inquiry, evocative coaching), revised curricula, proven reading, language arts, writing, math, behavioral, and socio-emotional instructional programs, and a multi-tiered instructional and support services format (e.g., a response-to-intervention model). While this research study was fully executed, this phase would represent only a scaffolding. The Task Force successfully presented a preliminary orientation for all district leaders during our annual Administrator’s Summer Institute; yet, the summer months quickly turned to autumn, and roll-out was postponed until late-winter.

During these delays, which underscored the overlap in my research cycles, I completed other aspects of the project. Following the eventual completion of the Procedure Handbook and then approval by the Board of Education, presentations were made to the Administrative Council and to all faculty members at each school. Next, trainings were completed with all I&RS teams and with the district’s Child Study Team members. One administrator commented: “The manual is remarkable, detailed, broad-in-scope, but not to be read from at a meeting; this collection of research, resources, and

worksheets – all in one place – lets the team collect information and make powerful suggestions to teachers” (Lizzie Bennett, Administrative Council presentation, February 11, 2011). In follow-up, a supervisor added: “The Task Force included request forms for use by teachers, parents, and the student, as well as documents to arrange screenings and evaluations. We need these” (Roland Deschain, Administrative Council presentation, February 11, 2011). The principal of the Mandeville Elementary School recognized that in addition to including a thorough action plan format, “this process has forms to make a referral to Child Study and to the 504 Committee. I respect how we keep ourselves responsible to the law and what’s best for our students, especially if they have disabilities” (Meg Murray, Administrative Council presentation, February 11, 2011).

For the presentations at each school, principals allotted me approximately 30 minutes during a faculty meeting. The audience consisted of all building staff, including teachers, support and office staff, safety officers, related services specialists, and administrators, and ranged in size from 30 to 300 participants per setting. Throughout the district, groups were attentive and, although questions and comments were few, the general reaction was of approval. At the Samaniego Elementary School, an educator exclaimed: “So, what’s the big deal? It’s ‘bout time we did intervention and referral services right” (Kristy Thomas, faculty presentation, April 15, 2011). As I explained the goal of our new pre-referral process, staff recognized the shift in vision to that of assisting teachers, with teaching, and meeting the needs of all students in the general education setting. One teacher’s query, “I can get a team to work with me to help a failing student?” (John Galt, faculty presentation, March 8, 2011), captured the emerging



tone of educators who were drawing contrasts between the operations of the I&RS Teams and the Child Study Teams. A staff member from the Krasicki Preschool summarized:

When I document how a student reacted to different ways I tried to teach him – all the strategies and modifications and things – but he’s still falling behind, and I think he might need special ed, I refer to Child Study; right? But if I want help in ways to teach this student, I come to I&RS. Also ... Child Study might not classify, but they might send the case to the I&RS to give me ideas, if the student is still in my room.” (Anne Shirley, faculty presentation, March 22, 2011)

During a six-week period, I completed two to three-hour group training sessions with each school’s Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) Team and with all members of the Child Study Team, including supervisors, related services and support staff, and secretaries. For most schools, the principal convened an I&RS Team meeting beforehand to review the Procedure Manual, orient to the vision of the I&RS model, and restructure current cases to the new procedures. A teacher at the Henryson School – North exclaimed: “This is so much more about teaching” (Owen Meany, I&RS Team training, April 12, 2011)! Another teacher pointed out: “We’re going to need a lot more training to get better at this [I&RS action plan writing]” (Inigo Montoya, I&RS Team training, April 13, 2011). Although many I&RS Team members commented on the additional demands now clearly defined in the procedures, this educator from the LaFontaine Primary School captured the theme best: “I hope administration sees they got to invest in I&RS Teams. We’re only as good as the resources we have and the training they give us” (Melba Beals, I&RS Team training, March 22, 2011). During the special education training, the Child Study Team members recognized and applauded the impact that the I&RS process would have on instruction, as well as in identifying areas where subsequent interventions would best serve struggling students. A learning disabilities teacher-consultant (LDTC) pointed out:

Not only will a well-executed I&RS action plan offer the classroom teacher a better foundation for her lessons, but the student's documented response to these individualized instructional strategies could be a foundation for determining a student's eligibility for special education. This could be [a start for] an RTI model. (Clarisse McClellan, CST training session, April 1, 2011)

### **Unpacking the Model**

Over one thousand educators in the Echgan Palaber School District experienced the introduction of this domestic pre-referral model. The few, but illustrative, comments which were cited in this chapter suggest that the educational community was recognizing that the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process was more than just the next initiative, not just a name change on an existing service, and clearly a district-wide effort to promote student achievement through improvements to teaching. Findings from Cycles One and Two convey the acknowledgement from staff that their input was requested, valued, and incorporated into the new model. As the research literature and the pre-study data informed this project, efforts were made to counter any impression that our pre-referral model would continue to be one of the most inconsistently implemented processes in education (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003; Carter & Sugai, 1989). Moreover, data suggest that involved staff witnessed an alternative mechanism in how professionals could respond to a struggling student. While retention, remedial services, and classification for special education remain available, the I&RS process would afford teachers unique instructional programs, curricular tools and resources, professional development, consult with a specialized educational team, and administrative oversight to enhance teaching practices in their own classrooms.

The Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) Procedure Handbook, which was Board-approved and presented to administrators, principals, and I&RS Team members,

represents more than a collection of forms and procedures. As much as the educational community was recognizing in Cycle Two how this model differs from the Child Study Team's process for determining a student's eligibility for special education and related services, administrators and teachers were beginning to understand the expectation and the vision that teaching must change to accommodate to the way the student learns. This paradigm shift from finding a disability to assisting a teacher was evident in educators' calls for additional training, more accessible instructional leadership, and sustained oversight from district administrators. I was heartened by the proactive responses of school principals who took charge of their school-based I&RS Teams, launched book studies, and conducted additional pre-referral training sessions to support the I&RS process. In addition, I was thrilled with the Administrative Council's recommendation to maintain the District I&RS Task Force for ongoing oversight. However, I maintained some suspiciousness of the extant top-down, political, and status-quo dynamic of this culture. There remained that smug but respectful kowtowing to authority figures which tended to impede movement and change. Equally telling were the staring faces, at the faculty meetings, with their unspoken messages of anxiety, confusion, and fear. These data informed my planning and actions for the next cycle.

### **Leadership: Are We There Yet?**

In my development as a transformational school leader, I have grounded my leadership efforts on setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood, 1996). Symbolically, and for purposes of this study within the Echgan Palaber School District, these three critical categories of successful leadership correspond to each of the research cycles. Cycle One was designed to encourage staff to

talk about our schools, to make sense or find meaning in their work, and to establish a sense of personal identity or connection to the teaching-learning process. From this, I facilitated a shared understanding of the status of our pre-referral model, the articulation of a vision to improve teaching, the commitment for better communication and collaboration, and the goal for an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process. With the salient feature of Cycle Two being the development and implementation of this process, I was truly focused on leadership practices that influenced the technical skills of our schools, offered intellectual stimulation, and provided individualized support and appropriate models of best leading, teaching, and learning practices (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). This cycle afforded me these opportunities not only through my interactions with the Task Force, but also during my presentations with the I&RS Teams, the Child Study Teams, and also the larger educational community. Cycle Three was envisioned as a means to strengthen the district and school cultures, to repurpose and refine the organizational structures, and to reinvigorate and reinvest in our collaborative processes. As I progress in closing the gap between my espoused theory and my theory-in-use, I am reminded of the importance of change and adaptation with the complex meaning-making system within me, my colleagues, and the organization.

Earlier I shared how comfortably or naturally I engaged a democratic leadership style during Cycle Two that encouraged participation and discussion, offered motivation and inspiration, and shared decision-making with the other members (Anderson, 1959). Perhaps, I recognized within my district the prevalence of an autocratic leadership which underwhelmed and suppressed through its top-down, authoritarian, directive, production-centered, coercive, punitive, indifferent, task-oriented, persuasive, and closed style (Bass

& Bass, 2008). Further, I was disappointed by my fellow administrator's passive, hands-off, and vision-less form of a laissez-faire leadership (White & Lippitt, 1960). While neither of these leadership styles proved effective in making needed change or improving our schools, both also failed to tap into human needs, values, beliefs, and emotions. Critically, in perpetuating an immunity to change, an autocracy tightly controls group decisions, determines all policies, techniques, and activity steps, and dictates the particular work tasks and partnerships within the organization. Further, the notion of laissez-faire leadership suggests that in the face of tremendous obstacles, the school district stays-the-course. Though there were times when an autocratic leadership style, specifically the high degree of control and the giving of orders, would have expedited the process, I submit that as a democratic leader I increased the involvement, commitment, productivity, and satisfaction within the educational community only by creating a shared vision and being relations-oriented, supportive, participative, consultative, communicative, and open (Bass & Bass, 2008).

### **No Child or Teacher Left Behind**

Cycle Two culminated with the presentation of the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model and process to an initially suspicious yet receptive educational community. The preliminary reactions and push-back, by the Task Force, paralleled closely those of staff across the district. Moreover, the reconceptualization of the purpose and function of a school-based pre-referral team set into motion not only a curiosity but also a hope and commitment that collectively the educational community could improve our teaching practices and further promote student achievement. My democratic leadership successfully facilitated the operations of the District I&RS Task Force, as well

as the engagement of district stakeholders and educators. This cycle showcased the moving step which Lewin (1947) noted as the middle sequence between unfreezing and (re)freezing. In Cycle Two, needed changes to the organizational culture, norms, policies, and practices warranted the appraisal of the existing behaviors or activities and the development and implementation of a new system. Further, in striving for deep, meaningful change, I guided the implementation of an I&RS process that anticipated the emotionally threatening issues that interfere with double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1974) as well as the anxiety and oppositional forces that give rise to an immunity to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). As I reflect on the successes of this transformation process, I am more committed to assisting, supporting, and empowering our teachers. In the Echgan Palaber School District, we acknowledge the keystone role of the teacher and we are creating communities of educators who talk to and value each other's feedback, who trust one another, and who welcome classroom observations and discussions regarding best teaching practices. A great teacher can ignite a lifelong inquisitiveness and instill a wanderlust for knowledge, in her students, in her colleagues, and in herself.

**Bridge to Cycle Three.** In the next chapter, I believe even Dewey (1934) would be impressed with the manner in which the Echgan Palaber School District arrested the assembly line progression of students to special education. Further, he would note leadership's recommitment to democratic principles, including social justice and equality, where the instructional practices for all teachers are being improved. We – the organization's stakeholders – designed a new blueprint. We retooled and refitted the operations. We brought in consultants and we advanced the skill levels of our professionals. You might say we stopped making widgets. More importantly, the

educational community started making connections, conversations, and relationships.

Much like the lesson of Vollmer's (2010) blueberry story, teachers cannot reject the students who are not up-to-standards:

We take them big, small, rich, poor, hungry, abused, confident, curious, homeless, frightened, rude, creative, violent, and brilliant. We take them of every race, religion, and ethnic background. We take them with head lice, ADHD, and advanced asthma. We take them with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, English as their second language, and who knows how much lead in their veins. We take them all ... It's school! (p. 21)

In Cycle Three, you will experience educators assisting teachers, principals walking their hallways as instructional leaders, and teachers slowly opening their classroom doors.

## Chapter 7

### Cycle Three Findings

Education, of all societal functions, has a strong moral component ... There are deep theoretical and evolutionary reasons to believe that society will be stronger if education serves to enable people to work together to achieve higher purposes that serve both the individual and the collective good.

(Fullan, 2001, p. 271)

I was not daydreaming. As I stood in the back of a high school biology class, I entered data for a professional observation into my laptop computer. Two highly qualified science teachers – one from my special education department and one from general education – were facilitating a co-developed lesson plan with a cadre of thirty students. I knew there were ten students with individual education programs (IEPs) and, with access to the state-wide standardized test scores, the remaining students ranged from advanced proficient to not. Further, in this fifth week of implementation of their I&RS action plan, the educators had skillfully structured their room into smaller learning communities heartened with high expectations and enthusiasm, multimedia resources, and a project-based curriculum aimed at engaging students in addressing real-world problems and issues important to our society. I witnessed two professionals demonstrating how each personally and collectively wields the power to change the world and to change a student. Neither took this responsibility lightly. With quality instruction, shared leadership, and respect for each other as experts, these teachers ensured an educational forum for dialogue, sharing, inquiry, and critique. For those 43 minutes, I was reminded that teaching is as much about relationships, conversations, and making connections with people as it is with investments in others, in their future, and in



ours. I imagined learning environments, like this one, around the Echgan Palaber School District and across the globe, where students and educators discover and learn together, and where all educational stakeholders are committed to bringing out the best in every child. These two teachers reminded me that it is an honor and a privilege to stand before a class of students.

During Cycle Three, a new story was beginning. As the participant-researcher “in the middle of a nested set of stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63), I was not only documenting the transformation within my district, but I was also living and contributing to those experiences in classrooms, I&RS Team meetings, and interview sessions. Only now was I realizing how powerfully personal, reflexively relational, and contextually meaningful my audio-taping, photographing, note-scribbling, and keystroking of these actions, doings, perceptions, and feelings were. I noticed that I wasn’t merely recording data, I was part of the data, the story, and the meaning making of implementing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process in our schools. With my servant leadership fully engaged, I was inclined to accept the need for silent observation, active listening, and actually hearing both what was said and what was left unsaid. As Greenleaf (2002) noted, this leadership could be so subtle that “all anybody is likely to see is the result. They don’t see the cause” (p.151). Nevertheless, staff did confirm that they were being heard, that improvements were happening, and that new possibilities for change were emerging. Conversations were shifting from complaining and scapegoating to celebrating and appreciating. We were noticing the positives, our strengths, our competencies, and our potential. In attending with sincere curiosity, empathy, and a

willingness to learn, we were building relationships where educators were becoming more forthcoming, conversant, accomplished, confident, conversational, and trusting.

### **Observing Teachers Giving and Receiving Assistance**

For the first four months of Cycle Three, I vicariously experienced the inaugural efforts of the I&RS Teams through paper reviews of their developed action plans and summary minutes, including agendas, sign-in sheets, and recommendations. With two schools sharing the same principal, there was a total of ten school-based I&RS Teams. Although each team reflected the unique characteristics, dynamics, culture, programs, and resources of their school, the procedures for an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process were being delivered with a consistency and fidelity across the district. Some teams managed the transition of vision, philosophy, and purpose better than others. Before observing my first I&RS Team meeting in mid-May of 2011, the minutes of one school included the following sequence of statements:

Teacher wants referral for Child Study evaluations. He feels student has Asperger's Syndrome and needs different school to learn to read. ... The parent is not aware of the teacher's concerns but will take the child to his pediatrician. ... The school nurse, school psychologist, and reading specialist will observe the student. ... No action plan done yet. ... The teacher says everything's been tried to get through to the student. ... The principal directs the team leader to begin an action plan immediately. ... A plan is written; team to again meet in two weeks. (I&RS Minutes, April 7, 2011)

When I consulted with that building administration later in the month, she proudly indicated that her school has "taken ownership of teaching" (Angela Argo, personal communication, April 27, 2011) and understands that it is required that the I&RS Team, "review and assess the effectiveness of each intervention and referral services action plan in achieving the identified outcomes, and modify each action plan to achieve the outcomes, as appropriate" (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8.2[a]10, p. 104). She recognized the

importance of an intervention and referral services process to offer professional development and resources to “strengthen shaky teachers,” “make better the good ones,” and “get everybody working together in the same direction for each student.”

Cycle Three data were collected from the record reviews, I&RS Team meetings, semi-structured interviews, and the daily communications I had with administrators, teachers, and the larger educational community. From the coding, analysis, and interpretations of the transcripts, field notes, and my personal leadership journal at least five major themes emerged. Critically, the earlier voices – those that panicked that a student would fail in their classroom, grew angry that school leaders were not doing enough, or feared a potentially disabled student would not be identified in time – were growing silent here. Though there had not been a significant increase in the referral of students to the Child Study Team or the District 504 Committee by this time, staff were reminded that these mechanisms remained in place. Instead, teachers were requesting assistance from the I&RS Teams with different educational expectations. Questions, recommendations, suggestions, opinions, and innovative ideas about teaching were starting to appear in minutes and action plans. Moreover, meeting attendance logs were showing that teachers, administrators, parents, and essential educators – often absent in the pre-referral process – were once again finding their places at the table, engaging in conversations about effective instructional practices, and establishing partnerships.

### **Oversight, Sharing, and Asking Courageous Questions**

Data collected from observations of the I&RS Team meetings and during the semi-structured interviews provided a wealth of insightful information regarding the functioning of the repurposed pre-referral process and its vision of enhanced teaching.

There was the immediate recognition that meetings were conducted most efficiently; lead by the school administrator; attended by knowledgeable specialists; structured around generating meaningful teaching strategies; designed to provide support, monitoring, follow-up, and adjustments for the involved teachers; permitted access to screenings, evaluations, and consultations with educational and medical specialists within and beyond the school district; and assessed progress through the dedicated management of an action plan. All participants acknowledged that the meetings accentuated a new focus – one that thoroughly explored the instruction within the classroom and the student’s response to that instruction. In addition, staff observations were quick to note how the format was similar to a work session, professional conference, and one of their professional learning community meetings. Five themes emerged from analysis of the data: The Perception Has Changed, A Streamlined Instructional Process, Renewed Commitment to Learning, The Difference is Action, and Assisting Teachers Teach. The following examples are supportive of the action research design and provide important evidence for answering the research questions.

**The Perception Has Changed.** At the end of a 35-minute I&RS Team meeting as educators were summarizing the recently created action plan for a student who was reading two years below grade level and demonstrating inappropriate social behaviors, the classroom teacher exclaimed: “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore” (Sara Crewe, I&RS meeting, June 1, 2011). Her quip sparked a few smiles, however, the solemn tone in the room was of pride, accomplishment, and commitment. That action plan reflected the professional recommendations of no fewer than six specialists, to

which that classroom teacher added: “There will be changes in my room tomorrow.” The theme of a change in perception was best articulated by a building principal:

One of the things I do notice is that the perception of what that process is all about – not only the name has changed but the way the staff has looked at it – it is not just a place where we come to classify children or it is not the avenue or the road to classification – it is the road to helping, to assisting, to looking at interventions, to coming back and having ongoing conversations. I do see the perception of the staff, as well as me; if nothing else: The perception has changed. (Nigel Molesworth, interview, May 23, 2011)

Several teachers expressed appreciation that the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model satisfies a long missing commitment by the district to support education:

What a concept: Assisting teachers to better meet the needs of the classroom! Somebody finally listened. Teachers aren’t quitters, but we cannot stand by and let nothing happen when a student is not succeeding. Honestly, I would rather do a better job at teaching than be wishful in thinking that that student will be teamed with a better teacher out there in special education land. The new perception is that we care about the education. (Harry Flashman, interview, June 14, 2011)

The school has been stuck in rut. We do the same things over and over. The new [I&RS] system is a fresh start. I like when the team listens to me. We don’t get into what’s wrong, what did I do wrong. We start with ‘what’s working.’ I like the support. I feel like I’m picked-up. Or maybe the weight is taken off me – for a few minutes, anyway – and I can breathe, I can think for a change. I like that an action plan is written and followed. I used to hate when a student was pulled out of my room and classified before I had a chance to start the old [E.P.E.S.] plan. (Elizabeth Bennett, interview, May 27, 2011)

I&RS is a huge paradigm shift, from: How do we get the student into special education quickly, to: How do we provide assistance to the teacher today to improve his or her skills. In looking at it this way, I&RS Teams are learning that teachers lack reading programs, for example, or use the same lesson plans year-in-and-year-out, regardless that students and their skill levels are different each year. I&RS builds relationships between teachers and specialists. It’s still early but there is trust and integrity developing that people will help each other. (Anna Howe, interview, June 6, 2011)

In suggesting how mechanistic and impersonal the previous system was, a school principal commented that the leadership behind an intervention and referral services

(I&RS) process has contributed greatly to promoting the changes and the potential for success:

There is a better understanding to the purpose of the process. Through this new [I&RS] process our teachers are truly educated and informed. The perception they're getting is that this is an instructional, teaching, educational process, not a prelude to special education. So, it is much, much, more clear. When you [the researcher] came out to present, explain, train, and support the process, you established with the faculty a commitment, an expectation, an expertise; there is someBODY behind the system. This is not something we are taking out of a textbook. You took charge! That was ... absent in the last system. Not many people understood the E.P.E.S. process. And the process slipped between the cracks. It was a mess, but nobody wanted to wrestle control for it. Staff trust you to do what's right. That's big! Don't let them down. (William Brown, interview, May 31, 2011)

**A Streamlined Instructional Process.** In responding to the questions for the semi-structured interviews, educators were often supportive of the old system's potential to enhance instructional practices, but they lamented how all too frequently the meetings digressed to a decision on the eligibility of a student for special education programming:

I believe the old system and the new system both come from the same place: anything that is going to help the kids – we are going to do it. I think the I&RS system actually gets-into-the-ring, it packs-a-punch: We will help the students do better, get better, achieve more, and be successful in the classroom. It may entail a whole lot more work; OK, but that's the price if you want to make a difference. I&RS forces the committee to speak in straight terms of education, not classification; in terms of teaching styles, not labels; and setting realistic goals, not just lowering expectations. (Kari Buhl, interview, May 25, 2011)

In focusing on the streamlined process by which the Teams address instructional practices, several professionals noted the collaboration of educators and the inclusion of a network of resources:

I see [I&RS] as part of the bigger intervention, instructional process that we have at [this school] to help students eventually merge back into the mainstream of learning; because a lot of our kids are, you know, off-track and come with deficits in learning and come with a lot of things that are missing. I think this particular process allows us to sit down and collaboratively find the missing links and kind

of link everybody back together, so we can all move forward in terms of student achievement. (Nigel Molesworth, interview, May 23, 2011)

There is less guess-work in the system and more accountability. I am saying that everyone who is touched by this system to improve instruction for that student is held to a higher standard; one that is not just driven by record-keeping, but raises the expectations for experts, teaching specialist, and the like, to give their absolute best. Those who have worked here for years and always wanted a referral service to provide resources to teachers are clapping and saying, ‘yeah, this is what we need for student achievement to happen.’ (Hans Castorp, interview, May 23, 2011)

I&RS is straightforward and defines the role of each person in the team. When there is a child we need to look further at, we assign that child to a person who will ensure that all of the information comes from many sources, with integrity and accuracy. I like that. This is a personalization of the process: The student won’t get lost in the mix and more importantly the teacher won’t get ignored in the process. And teachers need support in that area. With that one person – that single point of accountability – being at the ready, the team will always know ‘what happened’ or ‘what’s happening’ as we move through this I&RS process. (Elinor Dashwood, interview, June 2, 2011)

One school leader sourly reflected on the breakdowns and dead-ends of the former system and how its procedures sabotaged professional relationships. He recognizes how an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process is a real-time interaction between teacher-in-need and specialists-at-the-ready:

The old system left a bitter taste in so many peoples’ mouths; because what would happen [in E.P.E.S.] ... you start this process, you fill out this extensive paperwork, and you keep asking, ‘Anything happening to help the student?’ Blah, blah, blah – then, the school year stops. The rational person would say, ‘Well, I guess [the child study team] is going to work over the summer.’ But come September, the student is with a new teacher. The two teachers talk – nothing’s been done. The child study team says, ‘Oh, we destroy all that paperwork and start over each year.’ And now, two teachers scratch their heads and say, ‘WOW! If that’s the way kids are treated – these people drawing pictures in the sand – then I’m going to go back in my classroom and do the best I can.’ It will take a while for teachers to come out of their rooms again. But I&RS is a streamlined toolbox chock-full of teaching methods for teachers and a way for sharing information and coming up with ideas – BAM! Right there as life is happening. I&RS matches a student’s skill set now with the right one from the teacher.” (Phillip Pirrip, interview, June 13, 2011)

**Renewed Commitment to Learning.** Overwhelmingly, educators at the I&RS Team meetings and during the semi-structured interviews recognized the emphasize on better teaching that is informed, stimulated, and supported by competent, self-efficacious, empowered, fulfilled, and more knowledgeable teachers. With a renewed dedication to teaching students (not determining if they are eligible for special education), many staff suggested that the former system may have been guilty of preventing general education teachers from doing their jobs:

Good teaching is good teaching and my school prides itself on the quality of services we provide. The I&RS system fits well in my school. There is always dialogue between staff in regular education rooms, inclusion classrooms, or sheltered classrooms with our LEP (Limited English Proficient) population. It is teachers working with teachers. We have ESL teachers and remedial/basic skills instructors, and everyone is in on the instruction and interventions. The old system [E.P.E.S.] was a loop-hole where a struggling student was taken away from this efficient system of layered teaching, differentiated instruction, remediation, and constant support. No offense intended; but E.P.E.S. put that student in special education, beyond the reach of that efficient system of exceptional teachers dialoguing, planning, sharing, thinking, and teaching. I am glad E.P.E.S. is gone. I am satisfied that I&RS validates our commitment to learning. (Harriett Welsch, interview, May 27, 2011)

From the previous process, we looked at it like it was a whole different entity: them – the child study team. But [I&RS] is more of our buy-in, we have ownership in education. And this is something new. We, the teachers, school leaders, and other professionals, come to the table and we are steering this whole process. This is a systems change. We are now talking about better ways to teach, not how to get a child classified. In [E.P.E.S.] we filled out the paperwork and waited to be gotten to; then, we had our piece. I&RS IS our piece and this is how we improve teaching, through the teacher, by the teacher, and supported by a whole school. Great teaching happens now, not after the child study team does its testing. (Joe Gargery, interview, May 25, 2011)

In terms of taking back education and reasserting the teacher's ownership of the instructional setting, many professionals in the Echgan Palaber School District are beginning to view an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process as a partner to the general education milieu and an investor in student achievement:



A lot of our interventions require that children be taught at their levels; okay, that they are met where their needs are. And, those conversations that we are having through this [I&RS] process allow the teacher to go back into the classroom – or should I say – motivates the teacher to go back into the classroom to do what is necessary to meet children where they are. I see that when I walk in and I see different things going on, different instructional groups. I see a revised system of instruction; that makes sense to me. And by seeing that that lets me know that something's going right; we are doing something right with this [I&RS]. (Nigel Molesworth, interview, May 23, 2011)

I see that [through I&RS] we have taken control of the whole realm called education and we are not just looking on completed forms and missing paperwork. This is about professionals consulting with professionals. This is a collaborative process. We are pulling from all around, the past, and from experts who have a lot to offer to that teacher. We are getting a better – a more whole – picture of the student. Using the new forms, we are getting a lot to work with. Even the parent inventory and the letter that goes with it; we are getting that parent's information to the professionals who need it. This is a great source of information from the home that we didn't have in the past. With everyone's input, we are a stronger team and the process goes smoother. This lets us be proactive with our interventions and to think outside the box when it comes to teaching techniques. (Philip Marlow, interview, June 6, 2011)

I&RS is a scaffolding for instructional services; and, should teachers need to partake in the process, they will have ownership of it. It is for that teacher to know how she teaches her children. I&RS says, 'Hey, we are in this together. And what we can't offer to you now, we will get back to you, with ideas, with professional development, with resources, with different, better eyes, with stronger boots-on-the-ground. I&RS brings the right people to the table to get the job done right. This is not pass-the-kid; this is give me a bigger lever, I need to move the mountain. (Joachim Ziemssen, interview, June 14, 2011)

**The Difference is ... Action!** In moving beyond a wait-and-see format – that is, wait for the student to fail so miserably that only the intensive, exclusionary resources of a special education placement might be of benefit for the student – our intervention and referral services (I&RS) process is being recognized by staff as a take-charge, triage-to-recovery event. At a highly structured I&RS Team session, a classroom teacher unites with the Team in a collaborative, shared leadership, teaching-learning workshop. Specific

to the situational and classroom dynamics, meaningful, understandable, and manageable recommendations can be implemented the next time the teacher is in the classroom:

I&RS gets services in action; it is getting administrators, parents, and other experts involved immediately. We are doing basic skills, reading recovery, guided reading, tutoring, and Saturday school. There is more out there. We are learning what we are missing, that is, new interventions and methods of instruction that are out there. I&RS will enable us to plug them in and make them available to teachers. There will need to be training. The action plans that come out of the I&RS meetings say, 'Start Now!' By the first meeting we had all the background information on the student, there was no wait-and-see. When the first instructional suggestion rolled across the table, that referring teacher was ready to grab it and go! (Antonia Shimerdas, interview, May 27, 2011)

When we look at education, from a historical perspective, the norms that have been set up for instruction and learning in the country. For this majority of people who learn this way, there are those that think ... this IS the way. It's not the way. This can be very passive, slow to evolve, indirect, indifferent. And, I think with this whole way of differentiated instruction, is like smashing that whole theory that all of our children learn the same way or should be set to this model of learning. And I think being more open with that or ... more considerate that children have different learning styles ... I think with this process, it allows us to push the whole idea that we are going to address student needs and not just groups. It builds momentum. It does something meaningful now. I think that's so important. (Nigel Molesworth, interview, May 23, 2011)

For the new teacher, this new process permits – no, it makes very real – the opportunity to go to the team leader, to reach out to a veteran teacher or group of teachers and say, 'I need help. I want to integrate what our principal said. I am not sure what to teach, to write in my lesson.' This is collegial, cooperative. The process is about teamwork and finding, building, talking about, and doing interventions; the differentiation of lessons has to be known like the back of your hand, if you are a teacher worth your salt. Real great teaching spreads, and we want effective interventions not only finding their way to lesson plans and action plan documents, but also out the door, down the hallway, and into other classrooms. (Daniel Deronda, interview, June 7, 2011)

In reflecting that an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process is more than procedures and paperwork, but identifies leadership, responsibilities, relationships, and oversight, an educator commented how the inherent outreach creates partnerships that provoke immediate action:

There is more parent involvement. In the other one [E.P.E.S.], you send home a letter and say, would you come to the meeting. Sometimes they come and sometimes they don't. In the I&RS, there is more outreach; it's active. There are forms and surveys for the parent to get involved – you are getting their opinion, even if they can't come to the meeting. The I&RS team is an action team, they are not just passing the paperwork to the child study team. There is follow-up, there are people talking to each other. I want the parents to call me and to say, 'What are you doing to teach my child?' and I want to say, 'Here it is; oh, and by the way, here are some things you can do to help.' This process documents that things are happening and will continue to do so until the student gets better, gets back on track. (George Bowling, interview, May 25, 2011)

In the following comments by a building administrator, the urgent message cannot be missed that our intervention and referral services (I&RS) process has much catching-up to do and not a minute can be wasted:

I despised E.P.E.S. because it was a ramp to special education. Enough said. With this I&RS, I was initially concerned that it is now a longer ramp to special education. The district problem – and I want to be delicate – is what resources, what interventions is the district prepared to buy, or develop, or commit to that will make what we talk about and write in an I&RS action plan something we can actually do? When are we going to talk about multi-tiers of student support, like RTI? Can we deliver? I'm ready. I&RS is making the district ready. We need action. We need to push this. We need more solutions. Hey, no offense; but, I&RS is just the beginning. It's a great start and we need bigger ... instruction and interventions. (Rupert Campbell-Black, interview, June 8, 2011)

**Assisting Teachers Teach.** The vision of assisting teachers and improving teaching was clearly communicated at all stages of the development and implementation of our intervention and referral services (I&RS) process. There is little surprise that this theme emerged so prominently in the data analysis. Most professionals commented and celebrated how the mindset, perception, and dialogue stress the reality and expectation of teachers receiving assistance, support, training, and – if necessary – hugs from skilled colleagues, experts, and specialists. The process is teachers helping teachers improve their instructional practices:

As a member of I&RS, I know a lot more now than when I first started teaching. Do I know it all? No. But I have a lot to offer teachers when they come for help. As a committee, this is very helpful to a teacher. I'm telling you, these [I&RS] action plans that come out are great; things I didn't even think of. Somebody will say, 'Did you do this ... or that ... try these...!' And that teacher goes away with these ideas. I can tell from their response that they are going to make an effort. Clearly, you got to keep the teachers open-minded; they get frustrated. And we need to bring in fresh-faces who are going to offer wonderful professional development to teachers. That's how we make teachers invincible, bullet-proof. (Anna Howe, interview, June 6, 2011)

This [I&RS] is more of a collaborative team effort. You hear from veteran teachers, nurses, therapists, school leaders, counselors, and child study team people. You become bigger, being part of a team. It's not just you alone. Trying things you read in a book. This is like a consult with surgeons in a hospital. You get more positive feedback; you feel validated that your concerns for the student are real and that you need help. You get honest, valid, and strong suggestions, and sometimes you can take that suggestion and run with it. When I started working on the action plan, I felt like I was primed for success. (Julie Sorel, interview, May 25, 2011)

The bottom-line is to get services – the best services – to students. And to do that is to have highly informed, skilled teachers. I&RS provides a framework for professional development, for bringing in outside experts, for finding experts among us, and to have teachers stepping up to the plate. Those I&RS action plans are developed by collaborating, cooperating professions. Teachers have to step up; change their methods; and ... jump-start their education processes and their strategies as well. (Joe Gargery, interview, May 25, 2011)

In sum, educators reported not only a straightforwardness of the process through which teachers can access assistance, but also the exceptionality of the recommended strategies, interventions, and suggestions, with their ready applicability to the general education setting:

E.P.E.S. was referred to as the 'special ed thing.' Ask any teacher what E.P.E.S. – the acronym – stands for; they won't know. It wasn't important! E.P.E.S. wasn't something for the teachers; it was for the child study team to identify children who were failed by the system. After your presentations and the trainings, ask any teacher what I&RS stands for and they know. The purpose is clear and teachers now know that they will get help to teach differently, to teach where the student can truly get it and thrive. (Oskar Schell, interview, May 31, 2011)

This is a process that puts it all together; gets all the information into one place and leads to the development of an action plan. The focus of the process leads to better teaching. The old system followed a gloomy path to special education. Gloomy because the child study team kept their process in the dark, no one person seemed to know what was going on. You had to go here and there to figure it out. I&RS gives us an action plan – built by concerned educators and implemented by concerned educators – to define the actions, what do we want that teacher to do. We actually flesh out instruction and, if needed, more intensive interventions. And if that teacher is unclear there is a process and very knowledgeable, supportive staff to help. (Rupert Campbell-Black, interview, June 8, 2011)

### **Unpacking the New Conversations**

After a well-attended and particularly complicated I&RS Team meeting at the Sarma Elementary School, I found myself exiting the building with the mother of the fourth grade student we were discussing. She had said little during the event, and her facial expression and demeanor now suggested that she might be upset or angry. I asked what she thought would happen tomorrow when her son was in class. She started to cry. “Learn better! I know he will now!,” she blurted out:

I’m sorry. I’m really happy, and just shocked. Another mom told me after this meeting my son has to go to special classes in a different school. My son will be so happy he can stay with his teacher and his friends. (Bathsheba Everdene, personal communication, June 8, 2011)

Over the next thirty minutes of our conversation, I re-experienced the I&RS Team meeting through the eyes, ears, heart, and mind of a relieved parent who described the event “like on TV – when all the doctors and nurses get together and figure out how to save the patient.” Although she lacked the technical knowledge regarding how the teaching would be different tomorrow for her son, she understood that there would be an action plan in effect and that a reading specialist, a speech-language therapist, and specific teachers and administrators would be responsible. Before we went our own ways, she noted: “It was like they were talking a different language.” Later that night I

commented in my leadership journal how the parent's words perceptively reflected not only the new conversations of the I&RS Team, but also the educational language of instructional practices, curriculum, programs, services, accommodations, modifications, technology, assessment, and achievement now taking place. I also noted how I missed the opportunity to include parents' voices in my narrative inquiry and that I would need to conduct future presentations on our intervention and referral services (I&RS) process to parents, guardians, and community members.

Cycle Three provided important data regarding the processes of inquiry, reflection, exploration, and experimentation that result from conversations and interactions regarding meaningful instructional practices. Through this intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, my efforts were to build relationships with, between, and among all members of the educational community and to really understand what each educator and leader needs in order to grow as a professional. I included myself as participant-researcher, educational leader, and district administrator in this grouping. As important as the work of the District I&RS Task Force was in designing the Procedure Handbook, the fundamental aspect of this project was – and remains – relationships. In getting the relationships right, then all sorts of things become possible. Notably, Cycles One and Three afforded staff the opportunities to be heard and to tell those stories at the heart of what they want others to know and what matters most (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

As a result, this action research project was successful on various levels, including generating insightful aha moments that expanded awareness, provoked thinking, and changed our behaviors and ways of doing things. The aforementioned narrative data

suggest: The perception has changed, this is a streamlined instructional process, with a renewed commitment to learning, where the difference is action, and the I&RS Team assists teachers to teach better. Further, these themes informed my leadership in promoting professional growth and further encouraging educators to be reflective. First, I have made recommendations to the Administrative Council to develop educational training modules, within the I&RS scaffolding, that emphasize the study of teaching and learning, support collaboration efforts among educators, develop coaching relationships among educators, redesign our educational programs, apply the principles of adult learning, growth and development to our professional development model, and encourage more action research projects across the district. Second, I have noted the positive impact of our instructional leaders who, during I&RS Team meetings, give praise and inspiration, make suggestions, offer feedback and modeling, solicit advice and opinions, make available professional literature, encourage staff to attend workshops and conferences, and stimulate reflective discussions and collaboration with others. In sum, the benefits of this I&RS model cannot yet be measured in outcomes, but rather it is the process which offers the most to the Echgan Palaber School District and to other interested schools.

### **Leadership: You Can Get There From Here**

In the brief few months that I joined working I&RS Teams across the Echgan Palaber School District, I witnessed something remarkable, something that might not have occurred if I hadn't expressed concern, been so persistent, and pushed so hard to bring to implementation. I was proud that teams of educators – principals, teachers, support staff, and specialists – were meeting regularly to discuss teaching. Moreover, the

conversations and sharing of ideas were resulting in actions plans, as well as professional development opportunities, to enhance teaching practices. I wanted this new way of doing (classroom) business, this instructional reform to never end. So, there I was at the Obradovic Elementary School for my last scheduled intervention and referral services (I&RS) observation, and I contemplated sustainability. Despite how much of me and my leadership went into the development, I was satisfied that the process was not contingent upon my ongoing involvement. Principals managed the I&RS Team meetings; the District Supervisor coordinated the overall I&RS process, including leadership, training, and program assessment; and the District I&RS Task Force provided the oversight. Yet, as I reflected on my district's "dance of change" (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth, & Smith, 1999, p. 10), I realized that the Lewin's (1947) (re)freezing mechanism would be contingent on the commitment of the individuals within the I&RS Teams to those decisions in which they take part and to that drive for continuous improvement toward the group's vision of assisting teachers to advance student achievement. A sustainability of change would be a group decision.

Up to this point, I had not recognized, in the writings of Senge and his colleagues (1999), the reworking of Lewin's (1951) concept of force field, in which the resultant forces – driving and resisting – determine whether and to what extent change takes place. I believe my leadership and the efforts of the District I&RS Task Force focused on creating a fundamental shift in thinking. Further, in recognizing the status quo, we took into consideration the processes that limit or impede progress. We addressed the difficult decisions (as well as the minor ones) head-on. We recognized organizational and management limits, but then proposed meaningful policy and procedural modifications.



We accepted that in airing-out-our-dirty-laundry – maybe, discussing the undiscussable issues – there would be conflict, ruffled-feathers, and heads-in-the-sand. And, we engaged in systemic thinking – bottom-to-top and top-to-bottom – to address not only the symptoms but also the underlying difficulties. At this time, I am at a loss for the types of coping strategies we might require to maintain this progression of implementation, spread, sustainability, and development of change ideas. However, I remain – as I was during that last I&RS observation – attentive to three main challenges to my leadership and to sustainability: (a) allaying staff anxieties and hesitations about the process, (b) measuring successes of the I&RS Teams, and (c) maintaining this process as a district-wide model; that is, restricting any school from developing their own unique model.

### **Connections and Commitments to Improve Instruction**

Earlier I quoted Friedman (2006) who emphasizes that teachers need to demonstrate instructional practices that build and sustain relationships, confront and resolve unique challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> century student and educator, and remain mindful of the big picture for career and college readiness. Cycle Three data suggest that our intervention and referral services (I&RS) process has taken significant steps in making this possible for teachers in the Echgan Palaber School District. Our schools are strengthening professional learning communities by nurturing those discrete and essential acts of teachers communicating and sharing. Importantly, we need to further strive for the establishment of a district-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, authentic, enduring, and focused on rigorously and critically scrutinizing teaching that improves educational outcomes and student achievement. Through the five themes that emerged during this cycle, evidence supports organizational, instructional, and transformational

growth, a shift in the vision of a pre-referral process, and a leadership to promote and sustain second-order changes. I am confident that an established I&RS process has the potential to reduce the need for extensive bureaucratic, top-down systems of monitoring to check on school quality. Further, I recognize that the most powerful influences on teachers are other teachers. While our district policies and past practices have not embraced this phenomenon, I believe the influence of I&RS Teams will promote regular, face-to-face encounters among educators that focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. What teachers do together beyond the classroom can be as important as what they do inside in affecting school restructuring, teachers' professional development, and student learning (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

In this study, the educational community engaged in the development and implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process that assists teachers. Within this organizational, leadership, double-loop learning, and action research endeavor were the commitments to (a) raise the bar and close the gap of student achievement for all individuals and schools, (b) treat people ethically – adults and students alike, and (c) improve the whole district, not just one particular school (Fullan, 2005.) In highlighting that everyone has the responsibility for changing the larger educational context for the better, I ensured that we provided moral purpose and authority, gave a sense of direction, established overarching purpose, and protected the values, cause, mission, and ideals of the Echgan Palaber School District. Through my demonstrated servant leadership, I maintained a strong faith in the capacity of people, as well as the desire to bring that capacity forward (Wheatley, 2006). Moreover, I recognized in my leadership the comfortability in conveying the five facets of trust –

benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence – in building successful programs and schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). And, as Greenleaf (1977) noted: “being successful in providing purpose requires the trust of others” (p. 15). For trust to be forthcoming, the educational community had to have confidence in my competence, resolve, and principles. During this cycle, I noticed myself evolving from a building-based supervisor to a district-wide educational leader. A personal outcome for me throughout this research project was the realization that relationship-building is the key to successful leadership, and that trust is the key to building relationships.

The Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process within the Echgan Palaber School District continues to be a work in progress. With our commitment to imaginative, meaningful, and sustainable ways of achieving better outcomes for our students and for our teachers, we have taken steps to re-envision our school district as a self-improving system. This has been a profound realization. In brief, we have stopped trying to find the best teacher, we are now trying to create the best teaching. Since the next chapter draws this particular story to a close, there remains much to share of our accomplishments. Soon you will read how we learned that no significant learning can take place without significant relationships, that successful change occurs when relationships improve, and when relationships improve schools get better.

## Chapter 8

### Commencement: Leadership Toward Excellence

There is no magic: only people who find and nurture champions, dramatize company goals and direction, build skills and teams, spread irresistible enthusiasm. They are cheerleaders, coaches, storytellers and wanderers. They encourage, excite, teach, listen, facilitate. Their actions are consistent. Only brute consistency breeds believability: they say people are special and they treat them that way – always. You know they take their priorities seriously because they live them clearly and visibly: they walk the talk.

(Peters & Austin, 1985, p. 324)

Every time we move somewhere there is a place where we begin, a place where we end, places in between, a direction, and the road travelled. Life is a journey, so is learning. Sometimes there are maps, a compass, signposts, guides familiar with the area, and rest stops along the way. We notice other travelers as well as the locals. In broad terms, the journey puts us into situations where we frequently encounter or interact with strangers, unfamiliar customs and languages, or yet-unidentified circumstances. We get lost. We find our way. Ideally, we step into the unknown and then make it known to us. In experiencing things that we typically would not or could not within the comforts of our own backyard, so to speak, we are afforded opportunities to accept a challenge, to cope with difficulties, to overcome obstacles, and to aspire for success. Afterwards we retell these narratives of our lives “to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways of doing things” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). For, as Bruner (1990) hypothesizes, when we “describe formally the meanings” we created in our encounters with the world, we focus on constructing and making sense “not only of the world, but of [ourselves]” (p. 2).

Although this metaphor for life is not of my invention, I liberally employed it as a heuristic (and, at times, diverting) device to contribute to the telling of my story about this research study. Yet, you and I recognize that while it might help to illuminate and promote a humble appreciation of a particularly complex phenomenon, rarely does a metaphor explain. And, no matter how fitting it may be, the designated metaphor always presents as a potential hazard leading to oversimplification. Nevertheless, this study has qualitative aspects. Since a metaphor is not measurable and not able to be judged or ranked – that is, it is non-quantitative – perhaps we may agree that my leadership journey (as well as another metaphorical concept: transformation) is as much a component of this research project as the implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process. So, in turning around and describing to you the path I have walked – starting in a Brooklyn hospital – I confidently, enthusiastically, and proudly introduce this concluding chapter and its discussion of organizational change; teachers seeking and receiving instructional assistance; smarter, better ways of thinking about teaching; trusting relationships; transformational leadership; and student achievement, within the 11 public schools of the Echgan Palaber School District. As we unpack from our journey, you will have your scholarly explanations, conclusions, and recommendations.

For this action research study, I employed a qualitative strategy of inquiry to discover and amplify the voices within the Echgan Palaber School District. The primary purposes of this project were to improve the pre-referral process within all our public schools and to inform my emerging and transforming leadership. Yet, action research is not just about doing good things, it is also about doing them well. I maintained a heightened respect for the complexity of my organization and for the expertise,

knowledge, and performances that the educational community demonstrates in the course of everyday life. Moreover, I recognized and embraced not only our ability to identify and confront the issues but also our readiness for and our willingness to overcome a resistance to change. As much as knowledge comes from doing, a fundamental principle of this study was that the social world – and specifically, any process that exists within it – can only be understood by trying to change it. Initially, school leaders needed to accept that the longstanding pre-referral system was not functioning as the vision mandated. Next, we needed to understand that our efforts to fix any resulting problems had been superficial and simply targeted the symptoms. Single-loop learning never reached deep enough. However, in listening to the stories, observing events and meetings, and developing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, we investigated what structures, commitments, assumptions, mindsets, behaviors, and expectations governed our actions and relentlessly supported the system. And, finally, we needed to observe and reflect upon the changes in our actions that were indeed generating different outcomes for teachers, for their teaching, and for students. Within this double-loop learning, new values and assumptions that define this meaningful organizational change are forming.

### **Reflecting on Where We've Been and the Road Ahead**

There has been a transformation in the exchange of ideas among the educational leaders of the Echgan Palaber School District when we gather for Administrative Council meetings. I am recognizing how every agenda item, new business topic, district initiative, and school effort are aimed at high quality instruction that improves learning outcomes for all students. We are now motivated to catching up with the nearly three decades of change efforts that have focused on the improvement of teaching practice (Elmore, 2004).

For any school district – even in real time – this is no small task. Our intervention and referral services (I&RS) process has had a profound impact not only in how, what, when, why, and that we offer assistance to struggling students and challenged teachers, but also in how we approach accountability policies, content standards, curriculum development, lesson planning, contracted in-service sessions, professional development, classroom walkthroughs, staff observations, professional learning communities, and faculty meetings. Our attention is progressively turning to creating the supports necessary for teachers to sustain engagement with inspiring new ideas about their practice. We are taking steps down a path where every student is taught and competently guided by an enthusiastic, dedicated, productive, knowledgeable, and effective teacher. The educational scaffolding afforded by our pre-referral process promotes an understanding of student learning which is generated from the interactions of effective leadership, teacher competencies, student skills, potent curricula and instruction, and steadfast monitoring and modifications. In wanting to aggressively pursue a systematic change in education that goes beyond merely providing an intervention and then monitoring a student’s response, the Administrative Council is advocating a philosophical stance in which the idea that all children can learn is emphatically believed (NASDSE, 2006).

This research matters because the implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process compelled the educational community to examine its responsibilities to its stakeholders; to consider procedures and actions that seemed inadequate, at best, or wrong, at worst; to scrutinize leadership and teaching assignments that fostered confusion, mistrust, and disappointment; to deal with the potential implications of embarrassment, bewilderment, or frustration regarding this status quo;

and to interrupt the “skilled incompetence, organizational defensive routines, and fancy footwork” (Argyris, 1990, p. 116). Most critically, district leaders were forced to confront the state of affairs that their theories-in-use contradicted their espoused theories (Argyris & Schon, 1974). They said one thing, but did another. However, in moving forward, the new pre-referral process is aligned with the district’s vision statement that requires an “urgency to provide resources to improve instruction through exemplary and diverse practices.” Further, in compliance with the district’s mission statement, the educational community is taking 21<sup>st</sup> century leaps “to produce, implement, and enhance an educational atmosphere that produces academic champions.” Through self-responsibility we are securing better teaching and inviting stronger learning. We are becoming more constructively candid and trusting with each other. Importantly, we haven’t just gleaned a new insight or plan, our progress and future growth are occurring because we are producing consequences and implementing change from this insight and planning. In short, data from the I&RS process are informing our subsequent actions for educational reform within the Echgan Palaber schools.

### **Contributions to Leadership and Change: An Overview**

By way of my own elenctic dialogues on my studies of educational leadership at Rowan University, I confess to have been pursuing the perfect leadership style. After years of courses, conferences, seminars, projects, texts, and conversations, the idealist in me was humbled. Everyone wants to know how to lead best; there had to be a different outcome. However, I learned that there never has been just one right way to lead and that leaders think and behave in many different ways. There is no single leadership style, strategy, or approach appropriate in all settings. Specifically, leadership effectiveness



depends on the variables found in each environment, task, and relationship. I acknowledge that within a school district, successful educational leaders will adapt their leadership style and behaviors to the needs of the situation, students, staff, and larger community. Since these factors are never constant, discerning the appropriate style will remain a challenge to anyone who wants to be effective in leading change. Echoed in the words of Burns (2003), I now realize the purpose and contributions of my leadership:

In the broadest terms, transforming change flows not from the work of the “great man” who single-handedly makes history, but from the collective achievement of a “great people.” While leadership is necessary at every stage, beginning with the first spark that awakens people’s hopes, its vital role is to create and expand the opportunities that empower people to pursue happiness for themselves. (p. 240)

Through my recognition of the diversity of leadership styles, I draw upon my own strengths to lead and evolve this leadership as consequence to different situations.

Throughout this research project within the Echgan Palaber School District, I explored and embraced a transformational leadership style. Exercising “a process that ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others,” (Kouzes & Posner, 1996, p. 110), I focused my leadership on effecting second-order change in the implementation of an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process. From the start, I recognized the possibilities of inspiring higher levels of staff commitment to our district’s mission; of a willingness for educators to work differently, harder, and smarter; of greater levels of trust in school administrators and teachers; and of improved partnering, teamwork, and collaboration (Avolio, 1999). During the different cycles of this study, my proficiency with other leadership styles proved effective. As a democratic leader, I encouraged teamwork and collective efforts that embraced diverse school communities and ensured communication across cultures, practices, and

languages. As a social justice leader, I recognized discrimination and worked toward inclusion and equity. And, as a servant leader, I assisted all in further growing as persons; in becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant-leaders; and in improving the quality of learning and living for all, including the least privileged in society. Moreover, in cultivating professional learning communities committed to professional inquiry, data-driven decision-making, and best practices, as well as aiding teachers in adapting to new standards of accountability, I acknowledged how I could move my schools to higher levels of achievement with benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

### **Research Outcomes and Questions Answered**

Within the phases of this research study from my initial proposal, benchmarks, cycles, findings, and through the conclusions, I was frequently reminded of the interdependency, uncertainty, and vulnerability that exist whenever people must depend on one another to achieve desired outcomes. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) highlighted the challenges inherent in leadership:

To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear – their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking – with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility ... People push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated. (p. 2)

Indeed, I stayed in the game. In the successful implementation of a district-wide intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, my leadership challenged the status quo within the Echgan Palaber School District to do what is right and best for all students. Moreover and despite the expected resistances, the educational community

united, across the district and within schools, in ways that were not initially imagined. Leaders, partners, co-researchers, educators, and life-long learners stood to be recognized, raised their arms to volunteer, rolled up their sleeves to get the job done, repeatedly put their hands together in applause, and elevated their voices to make our stories heard. To satisfy the research questions, our school stakeholders adopted educational policies and a useful and effective system of scientifically validated instruction, practices, and interventions to empower, affirm, and assist teachers in teaching the way the student learns.

**How can I establish a partnership of administrators, teachers, support staff, and other learning community members in order to honestly and critically evaluate our current teaching practices for struggling learners?** In seeking out the voices of the educational community, the process of critically appraising the former pre-referral process lead to the successful development of an innovative intervention and referral services (I&RS) scaffolding. Throughout this project, relationships and conversations were essential in establishing and nurturing the interdependent partnerships that emerged. In my reflective journal, I noted how the facets of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) – benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence – were recognizable as threads within the fabric of my transformational, servant, social justice, and democratic leadership platform. We took healthy risks to improve our schools. We shared ideas, fears, dreams, power, time, choices, and competencies. We invested in ourselves, our practices, our students, and our future. Moreover, we cultivated a trust that brought us closer together, made us more protective of what really matters, and increased our confidence, control, and competence.

**How can my leadership engage the educational stakeholders for the purposes of developing and then implementing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process that enhances the overall quality of instruction in each of our schools?**

Although I presented the brutal facts on the status of the district, the educational community respected and responded positively to the knowledgeability and competence my leadership offered to the task. In articulating our collective vision for a pre-referral model that empowered, supported, and assisted teachers, we addressed our defensive reasoning and confronted our immunity to change. Overall, the responsiveness of my leadership style to situations, circumstances, and individuals ensured the implementation of an I&RS process which was more reflective of the district's vision and mission.

**How can my leadership provide a road map to creating and sustaining a school culture based on mutual trust and respect where the organization institutionalizes the essential changes for doing the important work of teaching, learning, and leading?** Throughout this action research study, I nurtured a collective vision, demonstrated preferred behaviors, coached staff to align their skills with the school's vision, managed organizational resources impartially and competently, and mediated those inevitable conflicts that arose as we imagined, developed, implemented, and monitored an I&RS process that assist teachers to meet the educational needs of the struggling student.

**How have the suggestions of the educational stakeholders been incorporated within the organization to build a learner-centered intervention and referral services (I&RS) process that enhances the vision of school improvement and shares the responsibility for its success?** As captured in the rich, thick narratives in the

findings of this study, the voices of our educational community contributed to the development of the I&RS process which affected a paradigm shift from referral mechanism (to special education) to assistance realization (for the general education teacher). In brief, school stakeholders reclaimed ownership of teaching.

**What has occurred within this organization when the professional learning community was allowed to shift from isolated practices to collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility, the freedom to ask for assistance, and the opportunity to overcome an immunity to change?** Though it is premature to celebrate a second-order change, the Echgan Palaber School District can be recognized for closing the gap between its espoused theory (i.e., what staff say they value) and their theory-in-use (i.e., what staff actually say and do). The educational community investigated what structures, commitments, assumptions, and expectations supported the existing pre-referral process and then transformed this knowledge into an improved system to assist teachers and improve student achievement. Figuratively speaking, teachers opened their classroom doors. Moreover, they took steps to support transformational practices and effective leadership and to improve instruction to meet diverse student needs via early, intensive, and continuing intervention.

**A Slight Quantitative Detour.** Prior to any presentation, the Superintendent of the Echgan Palaber School District rather ingenuously tells the speaker: ‘Be Quick, Be Brief, Be Gone.’ On the occasion that I was asked to explain the status of our newly introduced intervention and referral services (I&RS) program, I was reminded of his three-Bs rule, and wisely complied. As I reported on the success of the roll-out including the faculty presentations, team trainings, observations, oversight, and preliminary data to

the Administrative Council, he interrupted and asked: “That’s fine, get back to me on the numbers; but tell me: Is the new process ... new? Is it making a difference?” I handed him a page of data (see Table 4) displaying the results of the before and after Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey (see Appendix E). Before I could explain that I&RS Team members recognize improvements in how the meetings are run, in the quality of support and recommendations offered to educators, and in honing and maximizing the instructional skills of teachers, he raised his hand and said (referring to statement #4):

Table 4  
*Response to Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey:  
 Pre-Study (n=42) & Post-Study (n=30)*

1. We start our meetings on time.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	14.3	13.3	
<b>Disagree</b>	64.3	33.3	
<b>Agree</b>	19.0	53.3	+ 31.9
<b>Strongly agree</b>	2.4	0.0	

2. We listen attentively and respectfully to each participant’s suggestions, ideas, opinions, and concerns.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	0.0	0.0	
<b>Disagree</b>	16.7	3.3	
<b>Agree</b>	83.3	56.7	+ 13.4
<b>Strongly agree</b>	0.0	40.0	

3. We maintain an upbeat, energetic, and positive attitude at meetings.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	0.0	0.0	
<b>Disagree</b>	54.8	13.3	
<b>Agree</b>	45.2	50.0	+ 41.5
<b>Strongly agree</b>	0.0	36.7	

4. One of our primary responsibilities is to consider if a child should be referred to the Child Study Team.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	0.0	76.7	+ 76.7
<b>Disagree</b>	0.0	23.3	
<b>Agree</b>	54.8	0.0	
<b>Strongly agree</b>	45.2	0.0	

Table 4 (Continued)

Response to Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey:  
Pre-Study (n=42) & Post-Study (n=30)

5. We support teachers in brainstorming and trying new ways of doing things.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	
Disagree	33.3	0.0	
Agree	66.7	56.7	+ 33.3
Strongly agree	0.0	43.3	

6. We come to the meetings having done the necessary preparations to complete our task.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	
Disagree	45.2	3.3	
Agree	54.8	46.7	+ 41.9
Strongly agree	0.0	50.0	

7. Our team has the appropriate members in attendance to make the necessary recommendations for the student, the teacher.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	
Disagree	57.1	26.7	
Agree	42.9	46.6	+ 30.4
Strongly agree	0.0	26.7	

8. We inspire and challenge teachers to go beyond what they could do alone.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	
Disagree	45.2	0.0	
Agree	54.8	26.7	+ 45.2
Strongly agree	0.0	73.3	

9. As a member of this pre-referral intervention team, I have improved my skills for working with students who experience academic, behavioral, and/or health difficulties.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	
Disagree	35.7	3.3	
Agree	64.3	16.7	+ 32.4
Strongly agree	0.0	80.0	

10. In our meetings, we harness the strengths teachers have to meet challenges and to overcome obstacles.			
	% 2010	% 2011	Change
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	
Disagree	59.5	3.3	
Agree	40.5	63.4	+ 56.2
Strongly agree	0.0	33.3	

Table 4 (Continued)  
*Response to Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey:*  
*Pre-Study (n=42) & Post-Study (n=30)*

<b>11. I would recommend this pre-referral intervention model to other school districts.</b>				<b>12. We end our meetings on time.</b>			
	<b>% 2010</b>	<b>% 2011</b>	<b>Change</b>		<b>% 2010</b>	<b>% 2011</b>	<b>Change</b>
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	0.0	0.0		<b>Strongly disagree</b>	11.9	0.0	
<b>Disagree</b>	11.9	0.0		<b>Disagree</b>	61.9	40.0	
<b>Agree</b>	88.1	36.7	<b>+ 11.9</b>	<b>Agree</b>	23.8	50.0	<b>+ 33.8</b>
<b>Strongly agree</b>	0.0	63.3		<b>Strongly agree</b>	2.4	10.0	

“Whoa! That’s what I call an about-face! Go to the Child Study Team if you want special education; but, if you want to improve teaching, go to the I&RS. Got it.”

### **Overcoming an Immunity to Change**

Within the context of discussing my immunity to change, I note the limitations of my leadership exposed during this research study. In Chapters 2 and 4, I explained my engagement with the four-column exercise (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), designed to construct a mental map of my immune system’s resistance to change in order to understand my simultaneous commitment to change and to non-change (Appendix M). In responding to the focused questions with candor and truthfulness, I began to recognize why I make the decisions and behave the way I do that undermine my true commitments. The immunity-to-change language immediately appealed to me because of its connections to meaning-making and change as part of human development. To the extent noted, this research study was as much about me as it was about my school district and the implementation of an innovative pre-referral process. Meaning-making is value-laden, and values are



influenced by our history, including the events and relationships in our families and neighborhoods, our culture, and our unique personalities. Through my stories, I have shared much of me with you. Therefore, I accept that “meanings are not so much something we have as something we are” (Kegan & Lahey, 1984, p. 202) and the processes of identity-making and meaning-making are integrally related. As an additional tool for transformational growth, the immunity-to-change process helped me become more critically reflective on my assumptions and more effective in taking action on my reflective judgments.

As I noted in my personal journal, the four-column exercise illuminated the incompatibility between my professed belief system or true commitments to tasks and what it is that I am actually doing. When I reflected on my actions (e.g., being the perfectionist, the go-to-guy, the fixer), I could see how my thinking (e.g., if I don’t act this way, I will be seen as unproductive and inessential) shaped what I do (e.g., taking on more than I can handle with little regard for timelines, efficiency, or my capabilities). Despite the resulting stress and consequences of this sequence, my immune system was sustained. By identifying my big assumptions and big worries, I have begun loosening the hold of unspoken and in some cases unconscious rules. I have made significant progress in overcoming my immunity to change. Nevertheless, I remain a perfectionist with my writing and this has caused tremendous discomfort in being successful in finishing this research paper in a timely manner.

As an educational leader frequently working to implement district-wide initiatives, including programs for students, professional development for staff, and advocacy opportunities for parents and guardians, I recognize a limitation in my personal

leadership style to contend with the Political Frame (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The conflicts, the control issues, the struggle for and management of power and resources, and the politics shake my foundation. I am particularly unnerved by the constraints imposed on honest communication and flexibility within my organization that is so heavily defined by the Political Frame. This remains an area of needed growth for me. As I described earlier, I adopted and exercised strategies within my leadership profile to best negotiate and manage circumstances. Nevertheless, there were situations where I would have preferred to be more capable and competent with a transactional or Machiavellian leadership style to move the process along more expeditiously and get the job done.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Earlier in this document, I exposed some possible limitations of the study relative to my participant-researcher role, the demographics of this school district, the qualitative methodology I employed, and the fantastic expectation of achieving second-order change in a short period of time. In retrospect, I believe my participant-researcher status actually enhanced the outcome. This role emphasized the perception that I was part of the solution; not only was I collecting the stories and the data, but I was also at the table, in the meetings, in the conversations, and in the data. This needed to be an action research study with qualitative aspects. Although I recognize no limitation in the model I selected, I believe appreciative inquiry, with its ecological perspective on the transactional nature between people and their environments, its emphasis on empowerment especially those who do not typically have voice in the organization, and its reflective inclination to build upon current system strengths – the positives – that lead the organization to a greater

potential, would have been a better fit and have offered more to the findings and conclusions.

The three limitations of this study that I highlight now are the demographics of the district, the implementation versus genuine development of a new process, and the real time needed to achieve second-order change. First, the generalizability of this study beyond the borders of the Echgan Palaber School District remains suspect. However, I am inclined to believe that the receptivity or readiness for change in that next school district or organization might represent the tipping-point for replication. Second, the long term, sustainable improvements in the quality of teaching in the classrooms of the Echgan Palaber School District must be measured by more than a new pre-referral model, the distribution of a manual chock-full of flowcharts, materials, and resources, and the meeting schedules of dedicated educational specialists. Improvement in the educational practices can only be inferred at this time, yet the enhanced teaching will rely on the shared leaderships, collaborative relationships, the honest and trusting conversations, and the classroom contexts where student achievement can be affected and measured. And, third, I refrain from concluding how much a 15-month research study did to appreciate the underlying mechanisms through which the individuals of the Echgan Palaber School District communicate, complain, make meaning, focus together on a common goal, share the work, employ technologies, and build processes, such as an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, that enhance the prospect of organizational integrity. In short, I know we are on the right track; I just do not know where we are on the path to achieving second-order change through double-loop learning.

## **Recommendations and Future Research**

Upon the programmatic scaffolding afforded by this newly implemented intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, district leaders have the opportunity to introduce scientifically-based core curricula, instruction, interventions, and resources, as well as to incorporate a multi-tiered instructional and support services format (e.g., a response-to-intervention model). The I&RS Teams will require ongoing professional development and would benefit from training, for example, with effective use of universal screenings and progress monitoring, with application of proven instructional practices and strategies, with team-building, technology use, and leadership skills, and with introduction of techniques such as appreciative inquiry and evocative coaching, to name only two. Following the shift in thinking, there has occurred a movement; not yet a driving force within our schools, but a momentum that needs to be advertised, explained, nurtured, celebrated, monitored, and improved during conversations at meetings of the Board, schools, faculty, principals, departments, teachers, and parent and community organizations. Most importantly, this action research needs to be continued. There is tremendous opportunity for participant-researchers across the district to contribute to the findings discussed here. Through projects within their our classrooms, their professional communities, and their I&RS teams, these educators may extend the conversations and continue to inform subsequent cycles of these research.

Through my association with organizations, groups, and school districts beyond the Echgan Palaber School District, I have generated interest in forming coalitions and consortiums of school leaders to replicate this action research study. Some neighboring school districts, after implementing this intervention and referral services (I&RS)

process, might recognize the benefit in sharing resources and establishing networks of specialists-without-borders. Perhaps, the phenomenon of classroom teachers opening their doors to share coveted textbooks, lesson plans, and worksheets might occur on a district, county, regional, or national level.

### **Inhale. Think. Act. Reflect. Exhale. Repeat**

The path we created in walking this action research study took many of us out of our comfort zone and introduced us to new and old neighbors, new relationships, new conversations, and new ways of doing things and succeeding. This has been a great start. In implementing an intervention and referral services (I&RS) process, we established a scaffolding and a network with unrestricted potential. We transformed the model from referring a student for special education to assisting a teacher enhance her instructional practice. We shifted from disability-mindedness to teaching-responsiveness. We started opening classroom doors and sharing the exceptional instruction that was occurring in our ordinary environments, such as room 209. We challenged a top-down politically driven organization by insisting on a forum of discussion passionately articulated by those most directly impacted: our teachers. In addition to empowering and supporting teachers, we roused and re-engaged our transformational and visionary instructional leaders. We tapped into our professional learning communities and formed teams of instructional specialists wanting to share and to persist as life-long learners. We stopped looking for problems (to solve); we began learning to reflect on the positives and on our strengths; we started thinking about how we teach in alignment with how a student learns; and we began transforming the status quo of our substandard student achievement, with hopeful implications that could revitalize education in every classroom of the Echgan Palaber

School District. With repercussions that would expand the literature currently available on the topic of I&RS processes, additional study in this school district must continue.

As an educational leader, I will continue to express myself as a cheerleader, coach, wanderer, and storyteller. There are still many stories yet to be shared. In working with administrators and educators, I will encourage that we open communication for building relationships, that we ask critical questions to refine teaching, that we guarantee free, informed choice and a sharing of control, that we confront the brutal facts, that we continually test assumptions and beliefs, and that we redefine resistance as a positive force to generate new ideas. As this research study – this reflective process – enabled me to develop beyond Dewey’s and Lewin’s learning cycle where we grow through trial and error, I now fully comprehend Argyris and Schon’s conceptualization of learning as what we do simply by reflecting critically upon our theory-in-use. In making this personal to me, I accept that going through an entire learning cycle to further progress the theory is unnecessary; I may adjust my theory – the organization’s theory – through double-loop learning. In breaking down the barriers of status quo – that is, halting the routine and preset practices of taking for granted goals, values, frameworks, and strategies – we can set a collective vision, thrive within our relationships, achieve deeper learning, and lead learning (Argyris, 1990, Fullan, 1999, Senge et al., 1999). I am a transformational leader with significant servant, democratic, and social justice leadership components. My leadership theory-in-use emphasizes my priority to those with whom I work: with energy, enthusiasm, dedication, and passion, I lead people first, and we walk the path.

**An Afterword.** This dissertation has been a wonderful story of my leadership journey. Moreover, as I walked this path I recognized that leaders who understand the

capacity of stories to convey ideas can become persuasive agents of change. Perhaps, on a cognitive level, stories are easier for people to comprehend and remember than a sequence of isolated, seemingly disconnected minutiae. In establishing a personal or emotional connection with the listener, the narrator's style might offer a more indirect yet persuasive way to communicate thoughts and to bridge concepts. When life circumstances are complicated yet understandable, the story may satisfy a psychological need to conjure meaning from a profound experience. Or perhaps socially we just want someone to listen to us, to acknowledge that we endured something momentous, and to simply enjoy the conversation and the company. I am guilty of all the above. *Is scéalaíocht próiseas draíochta a ligeann chlaochlú amháin.* The act of storytelling entwines the narrator, the story, and the listener in a captivating tapestry of imagination and possibility. Stories teach, caution, entertain, propagandize, comfort, inveigle, and inspire. Within this living event, anything can be created – a new leader, an intervention and referral services process, and organizational change – even a new vision for positive and evocative transformations nourishing hope, life-long learning, and success.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Spiraled and Recursive Cycles of an Action Research and Leadership Study

ACTION RESEARCH	LEADERSHIP
Prelude: <i>July 2009-April 2010</i>	Prelude: <i>July 2009-April 2010</i>
<p><b>Plan:</b> Review: SPED data; E.P.E.S. process. Will POLITICS be deadly?</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Gather info: District Survey &amp; E.P.E.S. team survey; demographics; data! Assess agendas: BOE, leaders, schools, teachers, SPED.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Data – surveys; documents; observations; field notes. How to present? A jungle! All about survival.</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> How to get buy-in? What is district agenda? Educational vision? What is right thing to do for E.P.E.S./SPED/ students? Need to create I&amp;RS process!</p>	<p><b>Plan:</b> Review my background, coursework &amp; leadership experience. Is this TOO big of project? Can I fit this into my life? Can I afford? \$\$\$?</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Plan to get something done. Start journal, ITC columns. Research leadership styles. Balance my life.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> I CAN do this! But ... Scarce resources, conflict, competition at work: Behold! the sacred E.P.E.S.! My work-school-life is overwhelming.</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> How do I advocate for SPED? I need to lead with social justice. Do the right thing. Manage E.P.E.S.. Where is my power? How will I build time for me?</p>
Cycle One: <i>April 2010-November 2010</i>	Cycle One: <i>April 2010-November 2010</i>
<p><b>Plan:</b> What works with E.P.E.S.? What do teachers, leaders want? Need? If it's broken, E.P.E.S. needs fixing. Data are evident. The sacred E.P.E.S., symbolic, status quo. Get administrative support.</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Observe E.P.E.S.. Session checklist. Focus Groups. Field notes. Communicate. Inspire. Find meaning, value. Believe in this project. Build a culture of change, instruction, trust, faith.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Data – voices in transcription; process of helping students learn/teachers teach vs. classification. Stop the carnival!</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> E.P.E.S. goes. I&amp;RS needs to be new beginning, new way of thinking, new tools, new philosophy = teaching smarter.</p>	<p><b>Plan:</b> E.P.E.S. supervision is laissez-faire. Why my problem? Vision &amp; progress! I believe in education. Reform instruction = improve SPED.</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Use journal and reflective process; ITC.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Symbolic Frame-In-Use. SPED Supervisor. Doctoral student. Transformation leader. "Prophet?" Inspiration. What is significance? Stories? Myths? Heroes? A carnival!</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> I am getting buy-in, finding allies &amp; "staging organizational drama." How do I build a partnership, a professional learning community? How do I create trust, faith in project, in me?" How is my Immunity to Change in-play?</p>

**Appendix A: Spiraled and Recursive Cycles of an Action Research and Leadership Study (Continued)**

ACTION RESEARCH	LEADERSHIP
<i>Cycle Two: June 2010-April 2011</i>	<i>Cycle Two: June 2010-April 2011</i>
<p><b>Plan:</b> Building a culture, a new process needs a TEAM. Listen to community “voices” and data: Survey; E.P.E.S. team information; Focus Groups. Create the agenda; align goals and classrooms.</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Build I&amp;RS Procedure Manual. Present to BOE, Administrators, staff. Train schools, I&amp;RS Teams.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Absence of leadership, purpose, training, resources, &amp; oversight. Right people/right place? Good fit? Is this enough for change? Where is RTI? Training?</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> Structure is taking shape. I&amp;RS is scaffolding for so much more than forms. Focus is back on excellence in instruction; not ‘fixing a broken student.’</p>	<p><b>Plan:</b> SPED is not cure for general education. Community wants change &amp; leader to get schools, teaching/ learning back on road. I am compelled to do-it-all; but, STOP!</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Keep in mind agendas, the “factory” mindset, competition, conflicts, rules, roles, &amp; setting. Create an answer; be the architect. Focus on who needs assistance: yes – the students; but also, the teachers.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Journaling suggests I am dealing in Structural frame. Hold moral purpose. Democratic Leader. “Social Architect?” Authorship.</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> This cannot be “my-baby.” I need a team, structure. NOT about ‘who left this hot-mess.’ Design division of labor. Share. Create formal relationships.</p>
<i>Cycle Three: January 2011-June 2011</i>	<i>Cycle Three: January 2011-June 2011</i>
<p><b>Plan:</b> Enlighten schools &amp; I&amp;RS teams. Put right people in right place. Align system with human needs. Build partnerships.</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Semi-Structured interviews. Observe I&amp;RS. Session checklist. Field notes. Empower &amp; care. Celebrate successes. Satisfy needs and strengthen skills. Report to BOE &amp; administrative team.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Data in voices. Meetings to assist teachers. Action plans. Measuring student/teacher growth.</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> What next? Results inform continued use of I&amp;RS. RTI? Staff training? Coaches? Curricula?</p>	<p><b>Plan:</b> Work smarter, not harder. We are all in this together. People are greatest commodity. Adjust proactively to challenges identified.</p> <p><b>Act:</b> Fine tune the district’s and the I&amp;RS’s division of labor. Ways to ‘grow people?’ Serve &amp; empower.</p> <p><b>Observe:</b> Human Resources Frame-In-Use. Administrator. Coach. Cheerleader. Servant Leader. Hope. “Catalyst?” It’s about relationships.</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> Project is done, but we are just getting started. Hand-off to supervisor; where do I fit in leadership structure? Overcome my Immunity to Change? What’s next??</p>



## Appendix B

### District Survey – E.P.E.S.

- When did you last receive training in the district's pre-referral intervention program (**E.P.E.S.**)? [Circle one]:

Within this school year    1-3 years ago    > 3 years ago    Never

- Was this training meaningful to you in terms of how it applies to your teaching?

YES                      NO                      not applicable

Explain: \_\_\_\_\_

- Approximately how many students have you referred to E.P.E.S. in the past five school years? [Circle one]:

None                      1 to 5                      6-10                      11-20                      More than 21

- If you were to seek assistance from E.P.E.S. today for a struggling student in your classroom, what primary outcome would you expect? [Put a check  in the box that best indicates your expectation.]

- I would not request assistance from E.P.E.S..
- The student would be classified and receive special education services.
- The parent would become more involved in the student's educational program.
- The teachers – myself included – would be provided with instructional suggestions, supports, and resources to better meet that student's needs.
- I cannot answer this question.

- Would you be interested in meeting with other concerned professionals in this district to discuss E.P.E.S. and to consider ways of improving our pre-referral intervention process?

- No.
- Yes – please contact me; my name is \_\_\_\_\_.
- Yes – I will contact you, Mr. Lee, at 555-123-4567, ext. 9999.

**Thank you for completing this survey.**

**Please return it to Michael J. Lee TODAY.**

## Appendix C

### Survey for Every E.P.E.S. Team Member

1. Including this school year, how many years have you worked in the field of education?  
1-3 years      4-9 years      10-17 years      more than 18 years
2. Circle the highest level of education you completed:  
High school   Associates   Bachelors   Masters   Doctorate
3. Including this school year, how many years have you worked for the Echgan Palaber School District?  
1-3 years      4-9 years      10-17 years      more than 18 years
4. Including this school year, how many years have you been a team member on E.P.E.S.?  
1 year      2-3 years      4-9 years      more than 10 years
5. List the pre-referral intervention training you received prior to becoming a member of an E.P.E.S. Team:
  - \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_
6. Was this training meaningful to your role on E.P.E.S.?  
YES   NO   Explain: \_\_\_\_\_
7. List the pre-referral intervention training you received during the time you have been a member of an E.P.E.S. Team:
  - \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_
8. Was this on-going training meaningful to your role on E.P.E.S.?  
YES   NO   Explain: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you find the experience of serving on E.P.E.S. personally satisfying? [Circle one]:  
Always   Most Times   Some Times   Rarely   Never
10. To which EPSD school are you primarily assigned? \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for completing this survey. Please return it to Michael J. Lee, today.**

## Appendix D

### Checklist for Observation of E.P.E.S. / I&RS Meeting

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Student's Initials:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Observer:** \_\_\_\_\_

Observed		Not Observed
<input type="checkbox"/>	A member of the pre-referral intervention team clearly took charge and chaired, conducted the session.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team session started at the scheduled time.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The (“referring”) teacher requesting assistance participated in the meeting (in-person, by telephone, or electronically).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	A parent/guardian/family member participated in the meeting (in-person, by telephone, or electronically).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The student participated in the meeting (in-person, by telephone, or electronically).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	An administrator for the district participated in the meeting (in-person, by telephone, or electronically).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team reviewed the student’s cumulative record at the meeting (paper documents or electronic-access)	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information, feedback was gathered from the student’s other teachers and available at the meeting (paper documents or electronic-access).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team reviewed information pertaining to specific prior interventions delivered by the teacher requesting assistance (paper documents or electronic-access).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team reviewed information pertaining to the student’s health or medical status at the meeting (paper documents or electronic-access).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team validated the “referring” teacher’s concerns about the student’s learning, health, and/or behavioral issues.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team selected and stated the concerns of significant priority.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team described baseline data – pertaining to an area of concern – in specific, measurable terms.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team brainstormed realistic, meaningful interventions to address the learning, health, and/or behavioral issues presented.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team identified advantages and disadvantages for each of the potential options brainstormed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Someone asked at the meeting if the student should be classified as “special education.”	<input type="checkbox"/>

<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team considered the need for additional information (non-child study team actions).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team reached consensus, mutually agreed upon a solution to effectively address the teacher's concerns.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	A written action plan was developed for this student with specific, measurable goal(s), a timeline, and an identified pre-referral team liaison.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Within the action plan, methods, responsibilities, and the staff required to implement the tasks were clearly identified.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	The pre-referral intervention team session ended at the scheduled time.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Comments:**

## Appendix E

### Pre-referral Intervention Session Survey

Please put a check  in the box that indicates your level of agreement with each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. We start our meetings on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. We listen attentively and respectfully to each participant's suggestions, ideas, opinions, and concerns.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. We maintain an upbeat, energetic, and positive attitude at meetings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. One of our primary responsibilities is to consider if a child should be referred to the Child Study Team.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. We support teachers in brainstorming and trying new ways of doing things.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. We come to the meetings having done the necessary preparations to complete our task.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Our team has the appropriate members in attendance to make the necessary recommendations for the student, the teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. We inspire and challenge teachers to go beyond what they could do alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. As a member of this pre-referral intervention team, I have improved my skills for working with students who experience academic, behavioral, and/or health difficulties.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. In our meetings, we harness the strengths teachers have to meet challenges and to overcome obstacles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I would recommend this pre-referral intervention model to other school districts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. We end our meetings on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Comments:**

## Appendix F

### Invitation to Focus Group

Dear Colleague:

My name is Michael J. Lee and I am a graduate student at Rowan University. As a partial requirement towards completing the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, I am conducting an action research project involving our district's use of the Echgan Palaber Educational Service (E.P.E.S.). The purpose of this project is to understand [1] the experience of staff with this pre-referral intervention service; [2] what benefit the service offers to students and teachers; and [3] how our district can improve student learning, achievement, and success in school.

Recently, you submitted a survey regarding your familiarity with E.P.E.S. and with our district's strategies and interventions for addressing the needs of all our students, including those struggling learners. Thank you for completing that survey. Because you indicated that you would be interested in participating in a follow-up conversation, I am personally inviting you to a **Focus Group**. Other school stakeholders will be invited to this get-together via postings throughout the district, email, and word-of-mouth. The information and comments that you share during this informal, casual, and open discussion will be kept strictly confidential.

WHEN: \_\_\_\_\_  
WHERE: \_\_\_\_\_  
ROOM: \_\_\_\_\_  
TIME: \_\_\_\_\_

Attached is the agenda, including some of the questions that I will be asking you to speak to during the focus group discussion. I will be using a tape-recorder during the session so that I may give my full attention to the conversation. [Have you ever tried to write down what a person was saying to you AND maintain eye-contact? Impossible!] Again, the information I collect from the transcripts will not include identification of you or of any participant.

In appreciation of your time and assistance with this project, I will be providing some homemade desserts and refreshing beverages. Please arrive hungry.

I am extremely thankful to our Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent for their support and encouragement with this project.

Thank you, again. See you at the Focus Group discussion!

Michael J. Lee

## Appendix G

### Interview Consent Form: FOCUS GROUP

I agree to participate in a study entitled “*The Functioning of the School-based Pre-referral Intervention Team that Meets the Needs of Struggling Learners.*” This project is being conducted by researcher and employee, Michael J. Lee, District Supervisor of Special Education, Echgan Palaber Public Schools.

The purpose of this study is to examine how our schools are doing in providing quality education and, more importantly, what we are doing to improve our efforts to meet the needs of all learners. The data collected in this study will be the basis of a Rowan University dissertation project and may be submitted for publication in a research journal.

As a volunteer participant in this focus group session, I understand that questions will be presented and I have the choice not only in how and what I want to respond but also if I want to say anything at all. I understand that I do not have to answer all of the questions. My participation in this focus group should not exceed one hour. I understand that my responses will be audiotaped, or handwritten, and then transcribed into written form.

Participant’s initials \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that my responses will be anonymous and that all data gathered will be confidential. If I want my real name used in the study, I will make this request directly to the researcher today. Otherwise, for publication or distribution in my school community, I am in no way identified and my name is not used. I agree that any information gathered from this study will be used in the best way possible to benefit students, teachers, and schools in this district and in any other where the results might be helpful. I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty.

I understand that my participation does not imply employment with the state of New Jersey, with Rowan University, with this researcher, or with any other project organizer.

If I have any questions or concerns regarding my participation in this focus group or the larger study, I may contact Michael Lee at (555) 1233-4567, x9999 or via email at [mjlee@epsd.org](mailto:mjlee@epsd.org). I may also contact Mr. Lee’s faculty advisor at Rowan University, Dr. Virginia Doolittle, via email at [doolittle@rowan.edu](mailto:doolittle@rowan.edu).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Michael J. Lee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix H

### Focus Group Agenda and Questions

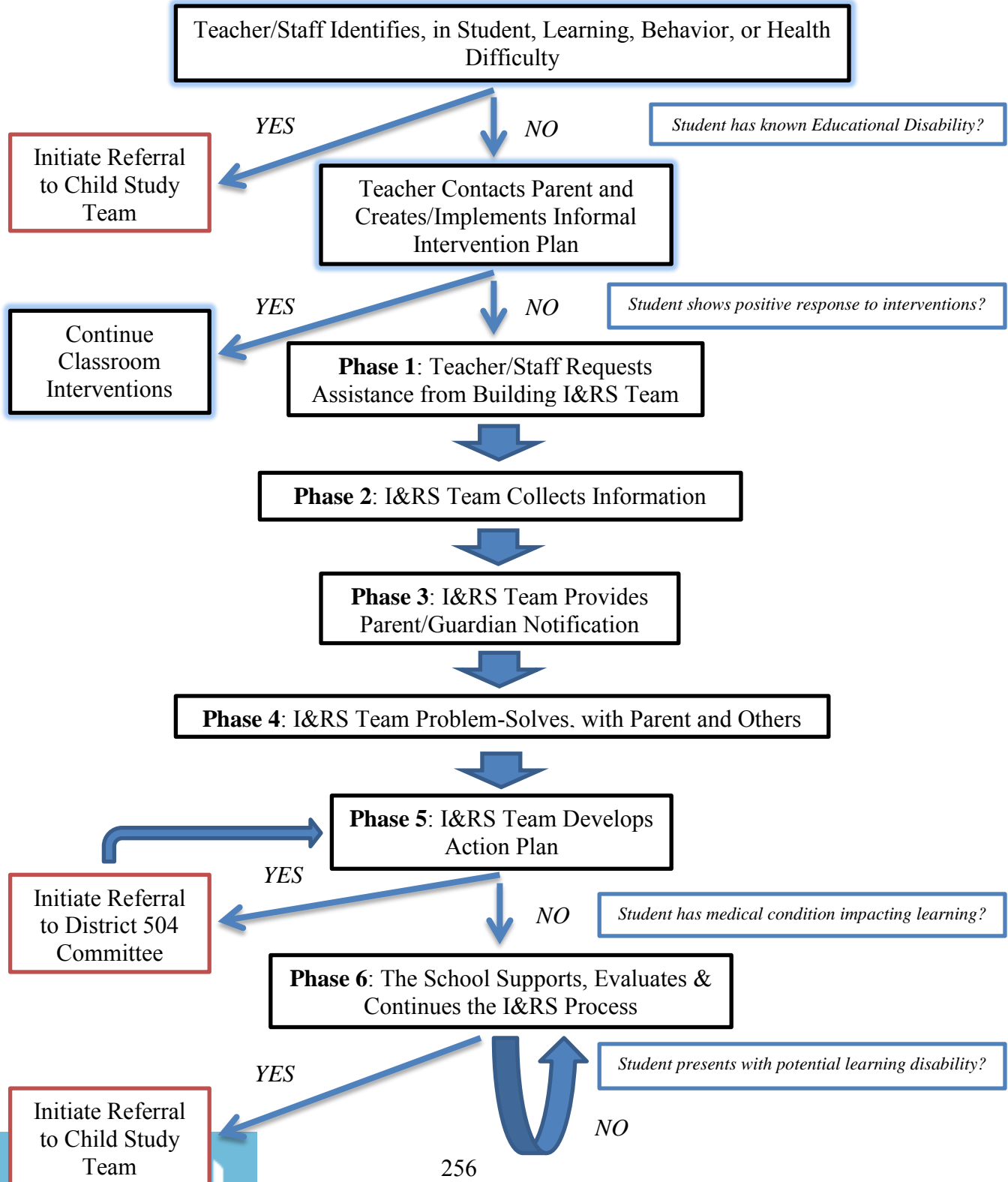
Project Topic: **The functioning of the school-based pre-referral intervention team to meet the needs of struggling learners.**

- 1) Introduction.
- 2) Explain purpose of focus group, confidentiality, & voluntary participation.
- 3) Identify use of tape recorder, note-taking, and overall process of gathering of data.
- 4) Invite participants to share personal information about educational career and experiences, as well as personal motivation to participate in this focus group.
- 5) A question, to start:
  - Consider the students in your school: how are they doing? How would you describe the classrooms? The educational climate? The academic achievement?
  - What is your overall opinion about the curriculum, the resources, and the teaching, in your school?
  - What service does the pre-referral intervention team (i.e., E.P.E.S.) offer in your school?
  - Describe the benefit / successes of the pre-referral intervention team (i.e., E.P.E.S.) for the students in your school.
  - Describe the benefit / successes of the pre-referral intervention team (i.e., E.P.E.S.) for the teachers in your school.
  - What are the limitations or obstacles associated with the pre-referral intervention team (i.e., E.P.E.S.) in your school?
  - How could your school better meet the changing and increasing expectations associated with its efforts to improve student learning, achievement, and success in school?
  - What is your overall opinion about special education and the interventions, programs, and classrooms provided to help these struggling learners?
- 6) Summarize the key points identified during the conversations.
- 7) Confirm that the summary is an accurate reflection of the discussion; make revisions, if necessary.
- 8) Any further comments or questions?  
Thank you.



## Appendix I

### Flow Chart



## Appendix J

### Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent for Interview

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Michael J. Lee and I am a graduate student at Rowan University. As a partial requirement towards completing the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, I am conducting an action research project involving our district's recent implementation of an Intervention & Referral Services (I&RS) model. The purpose of this project is to understand the experience of those administrators, I&RS Team members, teachers requesting assistance, and other learning community members who have been involved. I am asking you to participate in this project.

Your participation is strictly voluntary and will require one interview lasting about 45 to 90 minutes. While videotaping may promote a more relaxed conversational setting, you may decline to be videotaped and/or audiotaped. The general topic I want to explore in the interview will be commentary regarding your involvement, impressions, concerns, and suggestions toward the recently introduced I&RS procedures.

If you chose to participate in this study, I will protect your identity through the use of a pseudonym in this and any future publications or presentations. All data will be stored in a secure location. Please understand that you may withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice.

I appreciate your willingness to give your time to this project to help me learn about the implementation, use, and potential for our I&RS model. If you have any

questions, please feel free to ask me (555-123-4567, extension 9999; mjlee@epsd.org), or to contact my professor, Dr. Virginia Doolittle, at doolittle@rowan.edu.

Thank you,

Michael J. Lee

---

I have read the above statement and have discussed it with the researcher. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. By signing below, I am noting this agreement. Also, I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time.

My initials indicate that the interview session may be **videotaped and audiotaped** for transcription purposes \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ (print name) Michael J. Lee  
participant researcher

\_\_\_\_\_ (signature) \_\_\_\_\_  
participant researcher

\_\_\_\_\_ (date) \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix K

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- 1) In what ways does the new intervention and referral services process differ from the previous system?
- 2) What are your perceptions of the I&RS Team's role in the newly revised intervention and referral services process for your school in the Echgan Palaber School District?
- 3) How is the new intervention and referral service impacting the way instruction is provided to students?
- 4) What feelings emerge as you participate in the new intervention and referral services process?
- 5) How has the new intervention and referral services process made you feel about the school district and its commitment to improving student achievement? Why?
- 6) Explain how the new intervention and referral services process contributes to the quality education afforded to general education students and to special education students.
- 7) Give me a specific example of how your involvement in the new intervention and referral services process has impacted your role, practice, or delivery of services in our district?
- 8) (Display I&RS flow chart.) Briefly discuss the importance of each of the phases in the new intervention and referral services process.
- 9) How would you change the newly revised intervention and referral services process to improve the quality of assistance offered to teachers?
- 10) Is there something else you would like to contribute to this interview in reference to the intervention and referral services system or to our school district?

## Appendix L

### Personal and Professional Code of Ethics

**Be a member of the family.**

**Hold the door for the person behind you.**

**Be productive, be useful, and be helpful.**

**Know as much as you can about everything.**

**Do no harm to anyone.**

**Ask for help when you need it.**

**Leave the situation better than when you arrived.**

**Be generous with your time, gifts, friendship, stories, adventures, and smiles.**

## Appendix M

### Personal Immunity to Change Map Worksheet (Kegan & Lahey, 2009)

COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2	COLUMN 3	COLUMN 4
Commitment (Improvement Goals) (Visible Commitments)	Doing / Not Doing Instead (Behaviors that work against the goals)	Hidden Competing Commitments	Big Assumptions (What mindsets keep this system in place?)
<i>What am I committed to doing that would make me more successful?</i>	<i>What am I actually doing or not doing that works against those Column 1 commitments?</i>	<i>What are the hidden or competing commitments that keep the Column 2 behaviors in place?</i>	<i>What are the big assumptions that underlie those Column 3 commitments?</i>
<p>I am committed to sharing leadership and responsibilities at all levels within the school.</p> <p>I am committed to better valuing a leadership spread throughout the organization and better trusting that others will execute their duties with the expertise, skills, and motivation, necessary for success.</p> <p>I am committed to accepting that leadership is less the definition or property of an individual and more the contextual outcome of interactive, causal processes and relationships.</p>	<p>I do it all! Even if I assign tasks to others, I often do it myself; in the event that the other person forgets or does a poor job.</p> <p>I arrive at work hours before others and I leave even later. I act impulsively to get it done NOW; rather than allow a natural process to occur (e.g., work orders to be issued to custodians). I do more than my job. I don't say "no."</p>	<p>I need to know how to do every job if I am to be committed to properly preparing and training my staff (before I can expect them to do as I ask/imagine/dream/need).</p> <p>I am committed to being seen as the perfectionist, the playmaker, the go-to guy, the one who can do anything, and "the fixer."</p> <p>When I demonstrate absolute commitment to THE job, others will think better of me. Further, others will do AS I DO.</p>	<p>If I let myself down, then I would feel like I am not doing as much as I should/could/must.</p> <p>I assume that everyone has my work ethic and must give 110%.</p> <p>If I say "no" – even once – this will undermine my abilities and competence.</p> <p>I assume that if I want it done right, I do it myself.</p> <p>I assume that (my excessive) time-on-task predicts (unquestionably positive) outcome.</p>

## Appendix M: Personal Immunity to Change Map Worksheet (Continued)

COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2	COLUMN 3	COLUMN 4
Commitment (Improvement Goals) (Visible Commitments)  -continued	Doing / Not Doing Instead (Behaviors that work against the goals)  -continued	Hidden Competing Commitments  -continued	Big Assumptions (What mindsets keep this system in place?)  -continued
<p>I do not want to be the knight-in-shining-armor or the “single heroic leader” who creates change or improvement that exists only because of my efforts. I do not want progress to come to a standstill or, worse, to revert to the previous practices, if I step away.</p>	<p>I don't ask for help. I work in overdrive (for long periods of time). I define MY leadership by how much I can get done. I do promote professional learning communities, BUT I question others' motives or commitments.</p> <p>I volunteer for tasks with little regard for my ability to get it done in a timely manner. I demand of myself that I WILL get it done (regardless of the personal consequences – to me). I work that the job be done “perfect.” I panic when I have to be absent from work. I dread that someone will have to take-over for me.</p>	<p>I am committed to carrying more weight than humanly possible, so others won't have to; (but, I become resentful of others doing less).</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><i>Worry Box:</i> The job won't be perfect!</p> <p>If I am not seen by my bosses as being in the thick-of-the-action, I will appear to be not working hard.</p> </div>	<p>If I am not the go-to guy, I risk losing my status in the school.</p> <p>I assume that asking for help or directions is a sign of weakness, confusion, and inferiority.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><i>Big-Time Bad (BTB):</i> I will be found-out that I cannot do my job and be dismissed.</p> <p>I will be viewed as not needed, unimportant, or dispensable.</p> </div>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>I reference the poem “Directive” by Robert Frost. Symbolic and compelling, the story told within holds elemental and indispensable meaning, not only as I reflect upon my life, but also in the message’s relation to this research study and as applied to the status of public education today. This poem gives voice to our hopes and our beliefs, as much as it does to the exacting lament that we cannot go home again.

I admire the writer who states clearly and succinctly complex ideas, as well as seemingly paradoxical messages. Perhaps that in part explains my frequent attraction to pithy postings and nifty quotations to introduce my writings. My thought being: if only I could have swiftly gotten-to-the-(sharpened)-point and said it that well!

Those closing sentences of Frost’s 62-line, reassuring/distressing parable are the most commanding and hope-inspiring of the entire work. Having completed the journey through the forest, past the site of a former town, and now to a calm stream, the traveler is entreated to drink the “waters” of a personal past, of our bygone culture, of childhood, of innocence, and of a simpler time – seemingly – when life was better. And, in doing so, the darkness and confusion of the present is forgotten. But, this feels too idyllic and almost fairytale-ish; the passage of time and a suspension of belief are crucial motifs.

In the district of my study, which might offer instruction that is no more instruction/In a school that is no more a school/And in a city that is no more a city, staff pine for the good-old days when students were smarter, compliant, and behaved; parents were engaged and supportive; finances were flowing; and teaching was reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic. (When was that, again?) In believing that the past is the ideal, Frost opines that childhood is privileged over adulthood. Moreover, in weeping for the pre-No Child



Left Behind days, 21<sup>st</sup> century staff claim that the “aroused,” raging river of standardized testing and achievement accountability is “too much for us.” Yet, in his waxing nostalgia and romanticizing of the past, Frost wryly neglects to offer his traveler a map or a plan, only a (better) moment in time. As our mischievous “guide,” he hopes that we “are lost enough to find” ourselves. (How many in-service presenters have strived for that same outcome on our professional days?) Further, the poet – in child-like play – (biblically) taunts those who see but do not perceive and who hear but do not understand. From this humor, humanness, and matter-of-fact grandeur, I exact the action research requirements for planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

I share with Robert Frost a passion for nature, for the rich images, rhythms, and voices of rural New England, and for hardwood forests, glacier-carved ledges, stonewall-bordered paths, wildflowers, and pure, cold streams. You will find me there.

<sup>2</sup>Inspired by the legendary shortest of short stories (“For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.”) attributed to Ernest Hemingway, I adopted the technique of summarizing significant sections of this dissertation document with a heading of only six words. The lesson I learned was that it is not essential to prattle on endlessly to tell a good tale. Evocative and powerful in only six words, Hemingway’s piece of (“flash”) fiction was alleged to have been composed in response to a dare or perhaps to settle a bar tab. Complying with the requirement of a traditional beginning-middle-end story movement, the folktale grew that the author had prevailed in his challenge. Regardless, no evidence exists supporting the story’s origination from Hemingway’s pen.

