Creating Systems of Continuous Improvement: A Phenomenological Study of California Districts Engaged in Transforming into Learning Organizations

Kira Shearer
Brandman University, kdshearer@gmail.com

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Creating Systems of Continuous Improvement: A Phenomenological Study of California Districts Engaged in Transforming into Learning Organizations

A Dissertation By

Kira Shearer

Brandman University
Irvine, California
School Of Education

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Committee in charge:

Dr. Philip Pendley, Ed.D. Committee Chair
Dr. Melissa Bazanos, Ed.D.
Dr. LaFaye Platter, Ed.D.
BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
Chapman University System
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Kira Shearer is approved.

[Signature], Dissertation Chair
Dr. Philip Pendley, Ed.D.

[Signature], Committee Member
Dr. Melissa Bazanos, Ed.D.

[Signature], Committee Member
Dr. LaFaye Platter, Ed.D.

[Signature], Associate Dean
Dr. Patricia White, Ed.D.

March, 2018
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Those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint. – Isaiah 40:30
ABSTRACT

Creating Systems of Continuous Improvement: A Phenomenological Study of California Districts Engaged in Transforming into Learning Organizations

by Kira Shearer

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of district teams that created and implemented systems of continuous improvement as part of the Systems Leadership Collaborative using the Coherence Framework.

Methodology: This phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews to provide a narrative of four California school districts’ experiences with the transformation process. Data were collected from interviews and coded for patterns and themes, using Fullan and Quinn’s (2015) Coherence Framework as a lens for analysis.

Findings: Key findings illustrated that selecting 2-3 actionable goals to focus and guide the district are imperative and that creating collaborative structures while developing collective capacity are key elements of transformation. In addition, the findings in the study indicated that foundational to these practices, a focus on relational capacity building develops the mutual trust, consistency and a commitment to communication that will sustain the process.

Conclusion: The research and literature confirmed that implementation teams with senior leader participation as well as stakeholders of every level of the organization are necessary to success. In addition, successful districts intentionally focused on developing “teamness” through relational capacity, transparency and communicating ownership of both the problem and the solution.
**Recommendations:** Further research with the same districts is recommended to determine the extent and sustainability of continuous improvement systems and the impact on student learning. In addition, exploring the impact districts together in networked learning communities should be explored.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Schools and local education agencies (LEAs) throughout California now have a unique opportunity to reconfigure themselves as learning organizations committed to continuous improvement. This work is emerging as The California Way”. Tom Torlakson, California Superintendent of Schools, Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0, (2015, p. 3).

What is the California Way? How does it affect the teaching and learning of 6.2 million students during a global educational and cultural shift away from the Industrial Age and into the Information Age? Those are questions that began this study and remain at its heart. The goal of constructing an equitable 21st century system of education for the immense diversity of students in California public schools is a road barely paved for most of the state’s 1000+ school districts. Potholes, such as federal accountability measures, competing special interests, and unfamiliar territory of establishing local goals and accountability measures all threaten the process (Schrum & Leven, 2012; Wagner, 2008). Furthermore, new college and workforce ready requirements stand at the forefront of educational expectations, leaving educators and school system leaders questioning past practices and grappling with new structures of teaching and learning, while wondering how best to ensure that learning experiences are responsive to a wide variety of students’ needs.

The premise of a 21st century student is one prepared with the critical thinking, innovation skills, global awareness and technology skills to be adaptable to a world that in increasingly reinventing itself (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Wagner, 2008; Partnership For 21st Century Skills, 2007). Momentum of an economy based on knowledge, data and expertise and away from a manufacturing based economy is having a profound impact on
the expectations of our nation’s schools. A transformation, not just in content, but also in the ways students are educated has come to the forefront of nearly every discussion on the future state of the U. S. (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Jennings, 2012; Poole & Sky-McIlvain, 2008; Wagner, 2008).

**Background**

The focus on improving outcomes for students through school improvement is not a new concept in the United States. In 1893, as the U. S. moved from the Agrarian Age to the Industrial Age, the *Report of the Committee of Ten*, was published, which sought to standardize curriculum expectations in secondary schools to lead students toward higher education (Ginsberg, 2013). This report began the conversation on how and in what way “best” to educate the diverse population that attends our public schools.

The conversation continued through the decades as concerns regarding equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students regardless of race or income level surfaced, bringing the federal government into education with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The ESEA ushered in a new era of increased federal accountability as funding for targeted groups of students created a level of complexity that often has states and local districts focused on compliance rather than teaching and learning. Increasingly, what was meant to support students’ learning began to look like “one size fits all” mandates (Kline, 2012). As federal policy grew, districts organized their systems to respond to them. Whole departments were created to manage the oversight, ensuring the flow of funding.

Our history with these reforms has not had a positive trajectory (Rotherham & Willligham, 2009). Since the 1990s, the National Assessment of Educational Progress
(NAEP) has shed light on the increasing achievement differences between African American and Latino students and their White and Asian counterparts. This achievement gap has not appreciatively closed in the past fifteen years despite the intense federal attention (Reardon, et. al., 2013). In addition, results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that the U. S. was falling behind other developed countries in educational excellence (OECD, 2016). Taken together with an increasingly competitive and unpredictable global economy, many voices, both within and outside the education community, began calling for transformation in the way students are educated.

In early 2013 the state of California drastically transformed its policies in the area of K-12 public school reform efforts, shifting control and responsibilities to local districts and their communities. The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) and corresponding Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) brought closure to 40 years of state control and mandates. Based on the California Department of Education’s strategic plan, *A Blueprint for Great Schools, Version 2.0* (2015) was published to guide districts. State Superintendent, Tom Torlakson, has called the Blueprint “The California Way”. “The California Way rests on the belief that educators want to excel… and provides local schools and districts the leeway and flexibility to deploy resources as needed to improve” (Blueprint, p. 8).

As districts move into this new era, which requires them to design their own path of success, districts will need to rise to the challenge, discovering which drivers of change to employ and which sets of best practices are appropriate for their populations. In the words of researchers Kay and Greenhill (2013): “While individual teachers can adopt practices of 21st century teaching, the real impact on students is if an entire school
and district embraces and works toward the same vision” (p. 26). Despite a growing body of literature on the need for district transformation, there are few studies that describe what it might actually look like in practice. With more than six million students at stake, understanding how districts are creating new models of operation with student achievement at the center is an imperative matter for us all.

**Transforming Education**

Kay and Greenhill (2013) state there is no debate whether new models of educational systems are needed, rather “How do we make it happen?” (p. xiii) should be asked. With the advent of the 21st century, educational expectations that go beyond knowledge to application of technology, financial literacy and people smarts are needed (Poole & Sky-McIlvain, 2014). As a result, educators and system leaders find themselves questioning past systems and practices and grappling with new models of teaching and learning that truly address the needs of all students in a K-12, public school system. This type of systemic change, though necessary, faces many obstacles including the dynamic nature of education itself (Fullan, 2011; Wolf, 2011).

**A Focus on Schools**

The need to improve schools and outcomes for students has been around since schools became public institutions. The 1893 Report of the Committee of Ten, sought to standardize curriculum expectations in secondary schools leading students to higher education (Ginsberg, 2013). This report is often referred to as the architect of the traditional high school model still in use today. As the population of the U.S. grew, and became more diversified, so did the variety of voices weighing in on the best ways to educate American youth, including politicians, business leaders and community
members. While each of these groups may have different perspectives, all understand the need for high quality educational systems in order to achieve personal and collective success.

By 1965 education became a part of the focus on the civil rights of American citizens. President L. B. Johnson declared that education was a cornerstone weapon in the war on poverty, and led Congress to pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Ginsberg, 2013; McLaughlin, 1975). This law brought federal attention and a commitment to bring education reform into the forefront of the nation’s priorities. The ESEA is an extensive statute that ties federal funding and subsequent accountability to specific areas of designated needs in local schools. The law continues to be revised and reauthorized every five years, bringing a level of federal involvement and direction into local school districts, shaping how they operate (Hart & Brownell, 2001; McLaughlin, 1975).

Despite federal attention, the 1983 landmark report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* published by the federal government found serious flaws in the system (Ginsberg, 2013). Commissioned by the secretary of education of the United States, and populated with notable experts in the field of education, it examined the quality of elementary and secondary education finding a “rising tide of mediocrity that threatens the nation’s future” (A Nation at Risk, 1983). With the report’s description of declining student achievement and lack of expectations for learning, the report hit a national nerve; the idea that American students were less knowledgeable and prepared for the ‘modern’ world was unthinkable.
**California’s Response.** A Nation at Risk sparked the modern reform movement (Goodlad, 1984; Ginsberg, 2013; Jennings, 2012). California was the first state to act, adopting school reform legislation that increased graduation requirements, raised expectations and expanded standardized testing. The urgency of the report ushered in an atmosphere of reform that continued in California for over thirty years. With multiple groups advocating divergent perspectives, most often tied to specific groups of students or programs, it was unclear how learning would occur in a coherent way. The spirited discussions within the state often resembled a tug-of-war over effective practices (Dee & Jacob, 2009; Fullan, 2011; Hart & Brownell, 2001;). Poor scores of California students on the 1992 and 1994 NAEP propelled state policy makers to act with “laser like intensity” (Hart & Brownell, 2001, p. 184), so that by the mid 1990’s, mandated reforms were being rolled out to districts, including class size reduction for grades K-3, development of uniform academic standards and oversight of the adoption of instructional materials (Dee & Jacob, 2009).

**Results of No Child Left Behind**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was updated in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Born out of the dual concerns of American competitiveness and creating equity of outcomes for poor and minority students, it had the support of civil rights and business groups as well as both sides of the political isle at its inception (Ginsberg, 2013). However, this far-reaching law scaled the federal role in districts even further by holding them directly accountable for student outcomes, with a spotlight on specific groups such as English learners, Special Education and the economically disadvantaged. In order for districts to receive federal money under Title 1,
states were compelled to design punitive accountability systems based on annual student assessments (Dee & Jacobs, 2009; Ginsberg, 2013). These punitive systems were thought to encourage districts to take reform seriously, especially in addressing the needs of targeted populations of students.

While the goals of NCLB to improve student achievement, especially for “invisible” student groups, were laudable there were unintended consequences that shaped the system and mind-set of current public-school systems (Ginsberg, 2013; Fullan, 2000; Hart & Brownell, 2001; Schul, 2011). States and districts created “top down” systems, imposed mandated curriculums and frameworks (Schul, 2011) while at the same time scrambled to meet specific student needs. School leaders and teachers often had little say in what they were asked to implement. The resulting lack of buy-in frequently undermined any potential positive impact of these initiatives. As noted by researcher Michael Fullan (2011): “the main problem in public education is not resistance to change but the presence of too many innovations mandated or adopted superficially in a fragmented basis” (p. 23). The result is districts and schools, focused on more initiatives than they can execute well, often without effectively aligning systems, cultures and resources (Fullan, 2011; Elmore, 2004; Minckler, 2014).

**A Move to Organizational Reform**

Simultaneous with the Federal NCLB mandates in the U. S., Canadian researcher and author Michael Fullan began presenting a growing body of research that attempted to unravel the issue of reform efforts that were producing only small pockets of success at the individual school level but failing to ‘go to scale’ or last beyond initial implementation efforts (Fullan, 2000). He diagnosed the issue as one of attending to both
the local district culture and the quality of the surrounding infrastructure: “We know a
great deal about individual school success; we know far less about school system
success…” (p. 583). He began promoting a framework for reform with system coherence
as its primary focus, and in 2003, along with Andy Hargreaves, became the primary
architect behind the transformation of the Ontario Province, Canada school system. As of
2015, it was recognized as one of the top five school systems in the world (Center on
International Benchmarking, 2016).

Fellow researchers were coming to similar conclusions. Notably, the seminal
work of Richard Elmore, a professor and senior research fellow at Harvard University’s
Graduate School of Education. His longitudinal work with superintendents in a
‘community of practice’ published as, School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy,
Practice and Performance (2004), with incisive and deep analysis, captured the attention
of the education community describing a very different picture of successful reform
based on districts connecting to a focused, singular “problem” and examining the
structures that support a response. The idea of success dependent on levels of coherence
among key elements – environment, resources, systems, structures, stakeholders and
cultures resonated and was duplicated in other studies as well (Johnson, et al, 2015;
Kasmarick, 2011; Supovitz, 2006).

Researchers were finding that challenges such as whole-district improvement
require organizational responses that go beyond the leadership and knowledge capacities
of those at the top, middle, or even teachers at the classroom levels. Instead, it was the
integrative and dynamic nature of the system as a whole that supported learning (Honig
Systems Theory

Systems theory provided this context, as it looks to both integrative connections and to the whole (Senge, 1990). Senge goes on to argue that it is systems theory with organizational learning theory that allows application to the complex systems of school districts; the two parts together allow appreciation of the organization as a dynamic process (1990) rather than the simplistic ideas built into many accountability systems. A key tenet of organizational learning is that the organization will improve when the structures facilitate learning across the organization (Senge, 1990). This is exemplified through meaningful communication across levels and departments, active sharing of ideas and input to effect common purpose (Duffy, 2008; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) and when there is deliberate focus on the learning of the group, rather than the individual (Edmondson 2002; Crossan & Berdrow, 2003). Duffy (2008) added the label, systemic transformational change to describe the need to create new systems that affect a change in culture, through changing mindsets and behaviors of individuals within the organization.

Furthermore, educational researchers made connections to the socio-cultural dimensions of organizational learning, which explores the relationship of collective interactions and job-embedded learning. (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Honig, 2008; Minkler, 2014). Fullan and Elmore moved these ideas forward by adding an emphasis on the transformation of the processes of the system itself (Elmore et al., 2014; Fullan, 2015). “In order for a school to function as a system, as opposed to a collection of atomized individuals, it must contain the structures and protocols for engaging in collective work” (Elmore et al., p. 13).
Systems Coherence in Education

Building on systems and organizational learning theory, educational systems coherence focuses on the social system as a means of both problem solving and achieving the system’s goals and vision (Elmore et al, 2014; Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). At its basic level, it is described as a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions of each individual and especially collectively; further, it is defined as a district’s capacity to build shared meaning, capacity and commitment to action (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Elmore et al, 2014; Fullan, 2015; Honig & Hatch, 2011; Johnson et al, 2015). The literature also describes what it is not: It is not about strategies, programs or alignment (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

In 2013 California took a historic step forward, ending a 30-year era of dictating how districts were to fulfill mandates through categorical program monies and a punitive accountability system, and toward local school district control with the announcement of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). This shift was historic in two ways, first in shifting decision making to districts, school boards and their communities, and second in shifting the focus from individual school sites to the district as a whole system (Affeldt, 2015; Paul, 2014).

At nearly the same time, eight school districts in California, already working together under the California Office to Reform Education (CORE), were awarded a historic waiver from the NCLB system of accountability. The waiver, the first to be presented to an entity other than a state or department of education, recognized their efforts to seek a “holistic” alternative to the narrowly focused federal and state system (Fensterwald, 2013), through use of systems research to focus on overhauling their
collective accountability systems (Heubner, 2012) to drive improvement. The work of the CORE districts continues to be upheld as a model of possibilities of working across districts to solve problems. While the political and funding circumstances that brought the CORE districts together, and continues their work, are unlikely to be duplicated, districts are able to learn from their early successes and missteps (Knudson & Garibaldi, 2015).

A Coherence Framework

Notably, these emerging ideas have coalesced into a framework that provides a customizable, dynamic roadmap centered on research collected on the organizational conditions necessary to foster continuous improvement (Elmore et al., 2014; Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Honig & Hatch, 2011; Mourshed, Chijoike, & Barber., 2011). Continuous improvement requires school leaders to articulate a vision for student learning and engage all levels of the organization in collecting, analyzing, and acting upon information that supports them in realizing this vision (Duffy, 2008; Fullan, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2015). The elements of the coherence framework are organized into five broad domains:

1. Focusing direction: the process of “systemness” – the need to integrate what the system is doing. It is the process of involving initial and continuous engagement around a clear purpose.

2. Cultivating collaborative cultures: these elements are described at both the whole system and team level to include production of strong groups that work toward a common goal and celebrate the strong individual.
3. Deepened learning: which centers on efficacy related to developing expertise. It is the driver for better outcomes.

4. Securing Accountability: focuses on using evidence to create continuous reflective processes within the group (internal accountability), which in turn, interfaces with external accountability system(s).

5. At the center of the framework is leadership. Leadership is infused within each domain and emphasized as a needed capacity at all levels of the organization (Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Fullan, Quinn & Adams, 2016).

The connections among these domains are supported by recent quantitative research. Goddard and associates (in press) found that principals’ instructional leadership was a significant, positive predictor of teacher collaboration, higher levels of teacher collaboration predicted stronger teacher collective efficacy beliefs, and these efficacy beliefs were a significant, positive predictor of student achievement.

As described above, these domains are components of a complete system and as such are designed to work synergistically; each component both influences and benefits from the other three (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Leadership is a key of each component and “infuses the ideas of capacity building at all levels and work of the system as it combines the four components” (p. x).

The Coherence Framework draws on decades of research on effective schools, school leadership and continuous improvement to identify specific leadership practices, organizational processes, and efficacy beliefs that district and school teams can foster to enhance school capacity for continuous improvement (Bray, 2013; Byrk & Schneider, 2002; DuFour, & Marzano, 2011; Elmore, 2011; Fullan, 2000, 2004; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Johnson et. al, 2015; Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993).

**California’s Current Reform Structures**

The California State Superintendent of Instruction, Tom Torlakson has identified a key strategy, ‘leadership from the middle’ (Blueprint for Great Schools, 2.0, 2015), an approach derived from research on successful whole system change in Ontario, Canada by Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves who served as advisers to the Premier and the Minister of Education. The use of the Coherence Framework and leadership from the
middle language is purposeful; the State Board of Education in California has partnered with Maryjean Gallaghar, former Assistant Deputy Minister at the Education Ministry of Ontario, Canada and researcher Michael Fullan, to advise the internal leadership within the state (Fullan, 2014).

**Leadership from the Middle.** In this approach, the idea is to build leadership capacity in the ‘middle’—schools within districts, and districts within counties—so that they create cohesion of purpose with their superior entity and become instigators and drivers of change in their system. Thus, districts become advocates for their students and community, working together with counties, state and teacher professional agencies, and with their local schools and communities (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). Likewise, schools advocate for the unique needs of their students and community with their district leadership (Fullan 2011). The move to use Local Control Funding Formulas (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) were the first steps toward this new philosophy. California designed the funding and accountability plans as major drivers for decentralizing resources and creating local capacity to meet student needs (Blueprint for Great Schools, 2015; Knudson, 2014). Additionally, the expectation is that districts will design strategic plans aligned to local goals based on evidence of need (Knudson, 2014).

With continuous improvement as a goal, school leaders at all levels are realizing that although there is substantial data on student performance available to support decision-making, capacity to use the data in a coherent manner that supports meeting district goals is limited (Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Stosich, 2014). Many have information about the leadership practices and organizational conditions needed to establish
continuous improvement, but there are very few models of districts transforming systems and creating coherence around a narrow focus in California (Fullan, Quinn, & Adam, 2016).

**Systems Leadership Collaborative**

To support districts in developing capacities for transforming into learning organizations, the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) along with leadership partners Michael Fullan and Mary Jean Gallagher, created the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC), a network where districts would work together to learn from and support each other in creating coherent systems. Districts were encouraged to bring teams consisting of every level of the organization, and in addition to the power of collaborative networking, were supported in building their collective leadership capacity through a systems leadership approach using the Coherence Model as a framework (SLC, 2014). Fourteen districts began the journey, with seven persevering through the two years of the SLC’s work. These early implementers are now poised as models for other districts to learn from as they construct organizational coherence for continuous improvement.

In sum, district and school leaders face a wide range of challenges in building capacity for continuous improvement. Most of the literature in this area describes theoretical models, with strong emphasis on creating focused systems and social capital. Due to the dynamic design of school districts, there is little in the literature that describes how districts have built systems. In addition, there are few models to emulate. Researchers acknowledge this with the encouragement for districts to use theory to create their own pathways (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2016; Honig, 2008) using the right drivers --
capacity building around internal accountability, collaborative teamwork, pedagogy with technology as an accelerator and systemic change (Fullan, 2007). The Coherence Framework has emerged as a tool for bringing together the right drivers related to improvement to build shared decision making in schools (Elmore & Forman, 2011; Fullan, Quinn & Adams, 2016). This research strives to support California districts by describing the lived experiences of districts that participated in the SLC. Learning from the successes and barriers these districts faced has potential to accelerate learning for others.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

According to the latest demographic information collected in the state, 58% of California’s student population qualify for free or reduced lunches, a common metric of poverty. In addition, 23%, or 1.4 million, students are identified second language learners (Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0, 2015). With educational needs this high, California school districts must find accelerated pathways to promote, implement and sustain systems of continuous improvement.

There is a lot riding on the new strategic plan that the California Department of Education along with the State Superintendent of Instruction Tom Torlakson have created to guide the more than 1,000 public school districts in the state. Described as a framework for reform, *A Blueprint for Great Schools, Version 2.0* (2016), has shifted the state’s stance on expectations and support for schools. The Blueprint describes the need for districts to create their own system based on a coherent framework, noting “school districts in California have been given a unique opportunity to reconfigure themselves as learning organizations” (Darling-Hammond & Plank, 2015, p. 2). It moves from
encouraging fragmented initiatives to acknowledging that the entire system must work with dynamic alignment around a common focus, centered on continuous improvement of student learning and well being.

There is a growing body of research describing the successes of districts and schools that have transformed their systems, but most of that research has been done in small school systems (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012), several years removed (Honig, & Hatch, 2004) or with populations of students and staff far different than those existing in California (Levin, Glaze & Fullan, 2008; Kasmarick, 2011; Mourshed, et al., 2011). In addition, districts studied show that doing so is not a simple process. Honig and Hatch noted that coherence is not “an objective alignment” but a “dynamic process” (2012, p, 32) between external demands and internal needs of staff and students. The literature also suggests that there is a need to describe how and with what success districts are able to implement change (Stosisch, 2014; Thompson, 2008).

Despite a growing body of literature on organizational coherence in schools, knowledge is typically broad, leaving educators without clear steps forward for their particular context (Elmore, Foreman, Stosich & Bocala, 2014; Fullan and Quinn, 2015; Thompson, Sykes, & Skria, 2008; Wolf, 2011). Prior studies conducted with individual schools (Honig & Hatch, 2004) and internationally (Mourshed, et al., 2011) confirm the importance of working toward organizational coherence. What is unknown is if those same results will materialize in California districts, entrenched in cultures of compliance, with departments that traditionally operate in silos, and the presence of incredible diversity in student populations.
The California legislature, through its newly created California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) is recommending districts participate in professional learning networks to collaboratively build capacity and work through transformation to learning organizations (CCEE, 2017). However, these learning networks are just being organized (CCEE, 2017). ACSA, along with partners Michael Fullan and Mary Jean Gallagher, created the SLC network to assist districts in assessing their levels of coherence, diagnose issues and plan a path forward using the Coherence Framework as a foundation. Prior iterations of the Coherence Framework have proven useful in assisting the development of coherent systems focused on continuous improvement (Elmore et al., 2014; Fullan & Quinn, 2015). The seven early-implementer districts that completed the two years of the SLC have a wealth of acquired knowledge that other districts in California can benefit from.

There is a distinct need to conduct a qualitative study that describes the experiences, contexts and levels of success with which districts participating in the SLC were able to build internal capacity at all levels and move away from compliance and fragmentation using the Coherence Framework as a foundation (Elmore et al., 2014; Fullan, 2016).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of district implementation teams that created and implemented district systems of continuous improvement as part of the California Systems Leadership Collaborative using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability.
In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe the successes and barriers district implementation teams encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement.

**Central Research Question**

This phenomenological study was guided by the following Research Question:

*How do district leadership teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences in terms of creating systems of coherence, implementing systems of coherence, successes achieved, and barriers encountered?*

**Research Sub-Questions**

1. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of creating systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

2. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of implementing systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

3. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the success they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?
4. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the barriers they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?

**Significance of the Study**

Still in its infancy, California public school districts are embarking on a historic shift of responsibility and state accountability with a focus on establishing “local control for continuous improvement” (CDE, 2016, p. 3). To do so districts will need to shift their practices and systems. The Superintendent’s Advisory Task Force on Accountability and Continuous Improvement suggest districts shift their practices, structures and cultures to create coherent systems of learning (CDE, 2016). There are few models for California districts to learn from. This study will add to the conversation by describing the experiences, successes and barriers of early adopter districts participating in the Systems Leadership Collaborative network. The process creating coherence across a district is unfamiliar to most educators, and districts are interested in learning what has worked for others.

Additionally, this research will allow districts currently involved in creating coherent systems to evaluate their continued efforts in their transformation journey. Fullan, Quinn and Adam (2016) noted that the transformation journey is “…never finished since people come and go, new ideas come along, and the environment changes” (p. 73). The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCDE) and CDE will be interested in this research, too, as they are creating a statewide web of learning networks to support districts that fail to meet their goals as part of the new California state accountability program.
Definitions

The following terms were used throughout this study. For the purposes of consistency and clarity they are defined as follows:

**Theoretical Definitions**

**Coherence Framework.** The elements of the coherence framework are organized into four broad domains that work synergistically to create change in mindset, practice and process that produce a culture of continuous improvement within an organization.

- Focusing direction: the process of “systemness” – It is the process of involving initial and continuous engagement around a clear purpose.
- Cultivating collaborative cultures: elements described at both the whole system and team level to include production of strong groups that work toward a common goal and celebrate collective and individual growth.
- Deepening learning: which centers on efficacy related to developing expertise. It is the driver for better outcomes.
- Securing accountability: focuses on using evidence to create continuous reflective processes within the group, which in turn, interfaces with external accountability system(s) (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

**Organizational learning theory.** People of an organization are able to act upon the structures and systems of which they are a part. They are able to shift mindset as they continually look to learn. They see the “whole as greater than its parts” (Senge, 1990, pg. 69).
**Systems theory.** An interdisciplinary theory about the interdependence of relationships in organizations; It is a framework by which one can describe any group that works together to produce some result (Checkland, 1981).

**Operational Definitions**

**Collaborative culture.** A conceptual framework that draws from the following: “(1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement” (Eaker, DuFour & DeFour, 2002, p.3).

**Collective efficacy.** The groups shared belief that the group as a whole has the ability to perform in such a way as to ensure a positive effect on a target goal (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2004).

**Cycle of continuous improvement.** A continuous quality-improvement model developed by W. Edwards Deming in which a sequence of four steps (plan, do, check and act) are repeated in a feedback loop to allow for identification and modification… that “sustained over time, moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don’t” (Elmore, 2000, p.13)

**Learning organization.** Organizations in which participants continually expand their capacities to create and achieve, where collective aspirations are nurtured, participants learn together, and the organization expands its capacity for innovation and problem solving (Senge, 1990).
**Leadership capacity.** A measure of an organization’s leadership development (at all levels) such that it has the capacity to sustain efforts when key individuals leave (Lambert, 2003).

**Major initiatives.** Bold actions and change efforts required to produce a desired outcome and to demonstrate to the organization that a major change is happening (Ackerman, n.d.).

**Operational strategies.** Specific steps or tasks taken to accomplish the goals of the change effort (Checkland, 1981).

**School reform:** Designed to bring about significant and substantial changes in operating norms, organizational structures, curriculum and instruction, and relationships between students, teachers, and the community (Chrispeels, et al, 2008).

**Self-efficacy.** The “...beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute a course of action required to produce a given attainment” (Bandura, 1997, p. 2).

**Shared leadership.** Contains Capacity building, defined autonomy and resource allocation (Hord, 1997)

**Shared vision.** Answers the question “what do we want to create?” and “creates a sense of commonality that permeates the organization and gives coherence to diverse activities...where each individual has a similar picture and are committed to one another having it (Senge, 1990).

**Site leadership team.** A governing body of a school consisting of members from the school. Teams may consist of grade or department chairs. The team assists the administrative team with decision-making at the site level (Chrispeels, 2008).
**Sustainability.** Addresses how particular initiatives can be developed and maintained without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2016).

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to the California school districts that participated fully in the Systems Leadership Collaborative during both the 2015 – 2016 and 2016-2017 school years.

**Organization of the Study**

The remainder of this study was organized into four additional chapters, references and appendices. Chapter II contains a review of the literature on school improvement and creating systems of continual improvement. Chapter III describes the methodology and research design of the study. The population, sample and data gathering are also described in Chapter III. Chapter IV describes the research, data collection and findings. Chapter V provides a summary of the research findings, conclusions generated and resulting recommendations for action and further research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The days of California's reliance on a single standardized test for accountability purposes are over. While we had good intentions, we now recognize that we were using the wrong drivers for positive educational change. (Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0, 2015, p. 3)

There is growing body of research indicating when districts coordinate their efforts, high levels of achievement for students is attainable (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson & Daly, 2008; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig & Hatch, 2012). Moreover, it appears from this research, that systems can be created that provide for greater equity of results, thereby narrowing the achievement gap (Bryk, 2015; Hattie, 2015). The intent of this study is to describe the experiences districts that participated in the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC) had in creating and implementing systems of continuous improvement, including the successes and barriers encountered. There is also a need to understand the dimensions of the coherence framework and its role in supporting or constraining efforts.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the research and literature pertaining to the variables in this phenomenological study. First, a context was set with a look at the history of reform movements in U. S. and California education, with a specific focus on processes leading to improved student achievement. Second, key research on effective schools and districts was analyzed with a focus on the processes connected to effective teaching and learning for all students. Third, systems research was explored through the lens of learning organizations, specifically its relevancy to building leadership capacity within and across districts. Finally, a comprehensive review of the Coherence
Framework, which serves as the theoretical framework of the study, is reviewed. The literature was placed in a synthesis matrix to assist with analyzing overlapping themes and variances (see Appendix A).

**A History of Reform Movements**

Society uses education to prepare its citizens to perpetuate its future success (Dewy, 1934; Mandela, 2003). This has been a mantra of educators and politicians alike in various forms throughout the public-school era. Likewise, with this as an ultimate goal, the issue of how best to support an increasingly diverse population in an ever-changing world is one that has persisted through the decades, especially as society shifted from an agrarian to an industrial and most recently, to a knowledge-based society (Drucker, 1974; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Schlechty, 1990). With teaching and learning at its core, the question of “what is the best way to prepare our youth to become contributing members of society?” has been central to the reform movement.

**Reform Beginnings**

The history of reforming public schools began nearly as soon as they were created (Ginsberg, 2013). The desire to improve schools for the purpose of readying students for productive engagement in society was first seen on a national level with the *Report of the Committee of Ten* on Secondary School Studies. Published in 1893, it attempted to address the changing societal moves from an agrarian age to an industrial age (Ginsberg, 2013; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The Committee of Ten, chaired by Harvard president C. W. Elliot, advocated for a standardized secondary curriculum centered on a broad liberal arts education, creating pathways to higher education. However, the turn of the 20th century saw school enrollment swell as immigration grew. Schools shifted their focus to
meet the needs of both new immigrants and the emerging industrial-based work environment through an emphasis on basic reading, math, science, history and citizenship, ensuring they were prepared to join a manufacturing workforce that required a base set of knowledge that largely remained fixed (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Zhao, 2009). This archetype of high school is characteristic of the “traditional” high school still present in much of the U. S. and is being called into question as society has now moved into the 21st century knowledge age (Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Pool & Sky, 2014; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

**Modern Era Reforms**

Reform movements are primarily traced back over the four decades, following a shift from education as a local, community based concern to one in which the nation’s government plays a part (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). Efforts to identify how best to educate an ever growing and increasingly diversified society accelerated during the modern era. In addition, the general focus during most of this history was on individual schools as units of change, usually to the exclusion of the district they are a part of (Chrispeels & Gonzalez, 2006; Jennings, 2012). This has often resulted in pockets of success, or successes that did not last; understanding this context, and the processes used to produce localized achievement provides understanding for the complexity of district work.

Several articles in the literature highlight the phases of school improvement through historical periods, noting shifts in processes during each (Jennings, 2012; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000, Zhao, 2009). The first phase (1958-1970), was marked by little research into teaching and learning practices, rather an
“input and output” model was used that focused on the effects of resources and outcomes for students. In addition, the federal government, for the first time, intervened in local education, providing block grants of funding to support individual schools or teachers working with high-needs students (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). During the second phase (1970-1982), the need to focus on equity in education for all students surfaced (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2013; Zhao, 2009). Effective schools were explored, focusing on identifying causal factors for student achievement and attempting to imbed these factors into school improvement programs such as Success for All, Accelerated Schools and the School Development Model to name a few (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). During phase three (1983–late 1990s) context factors addressing scalability and more sophisticated methodologies were the focus as both educators and policy advocates noted the continuing variance of achievement within and across schools. (Byrk, 2010; Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2013; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Zhao, 2009).

**Public Engagement Movement, 1958-1970.** The first phase, in the mid-twentieth century, saw school reforms move into the public consciousness. The launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik in 1957, caught the U.S. public by surprise and mobilized the country into considering the math and science education their youth received (Zhao, 2009). The idea that the Soviets had reached space first, and might be spying on Americans was unthinkable. According to Hunt (2016) the launch sparked both paranoia and a revolution in scientific education. The international “space race” led to the creation of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 as a matter of “national security”
This was the first of more than a dozen programs in public education aimed at advancing learning in an attempt to compete with the Soviet Union.

The NDEA legislation marked, “the beginning of an increasing involvement of the federal government in education” (Zhao, 2009, p. 23). For the first time, legislators and policy makers proposed to aid public education through funding loans for college students and providing funding for math, science and foreign language in schools in order to compete on an international level with the Soviet Union. The historical significance of the NDEA is testament to combining national needs with educational policy that led to a changed landscape of education in the U. S. as schools competed for federal dollars. However, there is no evidence that supports the funding had any lasting impact on teaching and learning (Ginsberg, 2013; Zhao, 2009).

Equality for All Students Movement, 1965-1982. By 1965 education had become a part of the focus on the civil rights of American citizens. A focus on equal access, regardless of race, gender or disability became a priority, as did a focus on specific groups of students. It was also the first time, the federal government sought to control public education through funding (Altenbaugh, 2003; Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). For example, desegregation of schools had been enacted following Brown vs. the Board of Education in the 1950s to little effect; when the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, which tied funding to desegregation, schools responded.

ESEA. In 1965, President L. B. Johnson declared that education was a cornerstone weapon in the war on poverty, and led Congress to pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). The ESEA is an extensive statute that ties federal funding and subsequent
accountability to specific areas of designated needs in local schools. The law continues to be revised and reauthorized every five years, bringing a level of federal involvement and direction into local school districts, shaping how they operate (Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). The ESEA focused on assuring that all students became competent at a minimum level in reading and math, especially students from low-income levels. However, without a national assessment, it was difficult to assure this was taking place. Therefore, another aspect of the ESEA was the creation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that continues to be administered every four years. Throughout the 1970’s the federal government scaled its involvement in education, prompting some to comment that the era was characterized by an, “increased bureaucratization and loss of public confidence… in teachers and administrators” (Graham, 2005, p. 152)

**Standardizing Education Movement, 1983 – late 1990s.** Despite the focus on equality of the previous years, policies created in Washington D. C. “did not always directly impact educational practices in schools” (Graham, 2005, p. 152). The early 1980s was marked by multiple reports communicating the academic performance of American students, (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). Making the Grade, Action for Excellence and A Nation at Risk were a few of the reports, each noting the variance between groups of students primarily based on zip code (Jennings, 2012).

**Nation at Risk.** In 1983 President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education produced the policy brief, A Nation at Risk. It is considered a landmark piece of work, primarily for the attention it received and resulting wave of
school reforms that washed over schools (Goodlad, 1984; Ginsberg, 2013; Jennings, 2012). A Nation at Risk was commissioned through the office of Health and Welfare, with the justification that education was at the heart of our youth’s welfare and, ultimately, health. The report rallied Americans with the line “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (U.S. Department of Education, 1983, p. 1). It revealed that American education, once thought the best in the world, was diminishing when compared to other developed nations (Ginsberg, 2013, DeFour and Marzano, 2011). While this did not result in new legislation, it did result in further studies and policy reports with widespread recommendations for common competency standards, increased enrollment in higher education and focusing on basic skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Wagner, 2008).

**Goals 2000.** Looking forward to a new century, President George H. W. Bush convened a national summit on education in 1989. Here, the nation’s governors looked forward to a new century and defined what they believed necessary to provide greater parity in education for all students, and reforms that would ensure action. Six goals were established with the starter “By the year 2000”: all students will start school ready to learn, high school graduation rates of 90%, students in grades 4, 8, and 12 will demonstrate content competency, U.S. students will be first in the world in math, all adults will be literate, all schools will be free of drugs and violence and offer learning environments conducive to learning (Klein, 2014). It was also decided that the goals would become public in the early 1990s (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009).
It wasn’t until 1994 that the goals were used as the foundation for the Goals 2000: Educate America Act signed into law by President Bill Clinton as a re-authorization of the ESEA. Goals 2000 included the six governor’s goals plus two more: teacher preparation and parent and community participation. (Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). However, while some elements of growth can be seen on some of the goals, the overall result of the legislation was less than stellar; DuFour and Marzano (2011) reported, “the end of the century came and went… with no evidence to suggest that any progress had been made toward these ambitious goals (p. 12).

**California’s Response.** In response to the alarming language in *A Nation at Risk*, California was the first state to act, adopting school reform legislation that increased graduation requirements, raised expectations and expanded standardized testing. The urgency of the report ushered in an atmosphere of compliance based reform that continued in California for over thirty years. With multiple groups advocating divergent perspectives, often tied to funding for specific groups of students or programs, it was unclear how learning would occur in a coherent way. The spirited discussions within the state often resembled a tug-of-war over effective practices (Dee & Jacob, 2009; Fullan, 2011; Hart & Brownell, 2001).

**21st Century, Global Education Movement, late 1990s – 2017.** This period is characterized by a focus on whole systems to enact educational reforms. It is also defined by two major reform movements; No Child Left Behind which advocated for systems change through top-down, mandated approaches, and the Common Core State Standards movement, which advocates for changing the way systems think about teaching and learning.
Throughout the 1990s, educational summits with the nation’s governors, business leaders, politicians and key educators were convened (Jennings, 2012). Dual concerns of American competitiveness in a global setting and creating equity of outcomes for poor and minority students continued to lead conversations of standards and corresponding assessments (Zhao, 2009). The result was the 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, entitled No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which focused heavily on state creation of rigorous standards and a national goal setting and assessment monitoring that changed the landscape of public schools (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009). The legislation had the support of civil rights and business groups as well as both sides of the political isle at its inception (Ginsberg, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patton, 2013; Zhao, 2009).

While the goals of NCLB to improve student achievement, especially for student groups often overlooked, were laudable, there were unintended consequences that shaped the system and mind-set of current public-school systems (Ginsberg, 2013; Fullan, 2000; Hart, 2001; Schul, 2011). School leaders and teachers often had little say in what they were asked to implement. The resulting lack of buy-in frequently undermined any potential positive impact these initiatives may have been able to accomplish. As noted by researcher M. Fullan (2003): “the main problem in public education is not resistance to change but the presence of too many innovations mandated or adopted superficially in a fragmented basis” (p. 23). The result is districts and schools, with the best of intentions of improving student achievement, trying to focus on more initiatives than they can execute well, often without clear goals of for implementation or effectively aligning systems to support them.
California’s Response. Poor scores of California students on the 1992 and 1994 NAEP propelled state policy makers to act with “laser like intensity” (Hart & Brownell, 2001, p. 184), so that by the mid 1990’s, mandated reforms were being rolled out to districts, including class size reduction for grades K-3, development of uniform academic standards and oversight of the adoption of instructional materials (Dee & Jacob, 2009; Perry, Rynearson, Teague, 2002).

CCSS. Despite the intense nature of NCLB, U. S. students were not faring well on internationally benchmarked assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA), landing in the middle of the pack of industrialized countries in reading, and near the bottom for math (Richmond, 2016). In 2009 a convening of the National Governors Association, business leaders, and educators along with the Council of the Chief State School Officers, began the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The goals of the CCSS is to provide all students access to more rigorous standards that better prepare them for college and career expectations and make them more globally competitive, building critical thinking, communication and reasoning skills (CCSS website, 2017). While great promise was seen in the CCSS, they have not been fully embraced across the nation (Ginsberg, 2013), and to date, only 43 states are using them to guide instruction. The CCSS necessitated a new system of assessment of student learning that focuses on the skills noted above, as well as being technologically driven.

More importantly, there is discussion as to whether the CCSS are the right drivers for reforming education systems (Fullan, 2016; Kay & Greenhill, 2013). There is a body of research that identifies global, technological, economic, and critical thinking factors as
lychpins of transformation in the 21st century. Just as we had to rethink educational structures when moving from the agrarian age to the industrial, there is a growing movement to restructure schools for the knowledge age (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).* In 2015, President Barak Obama signed the latest iteration of the ESEA, called Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), (CDE, 2015; USDE, n.d.). The ESSA provides more latitude to states, increasing local control of curriculum, methods and processes for accountability, while setting expectations of outcomes using multiple measures (CDE, 2015). There remains a focus on meeting the needs of students who fit into specific subgroups and increasing the involvement of communities and other stakeholders. There is an expectation that states will encourage their districts to work with their communities and meet the needs of their unique students (CDE, 2015; USDE n.d.). “These changes represent a major cultural shift for California schools and districts” (March, Bush-Mecenas & Hough, 2016)

*California’s Response: LCFF and LCAP.* California is committed to the historical reforms of local decision-making ushered in with the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013. This commitment was reinforced in September 2017 with the submission of the state’s plan to the federal government, showing alignment to the national 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Kirst, 2017).

The current reform model is a 180-degree turn from the previous accountability model, shifting accountability measures and decision making over to the more than 1,000 school districts in California. In comparison, in 2005, there were 233 state and federal
categorical programs with multiple funding streams and a myriad of program requirements, most rarely reviewed for impact on teaching and learning. The architecture of this legislation is designed to transfer goal setting and allocation of funds from the state to local school district, their boards and communities (Miles & Feinberg, 2014), bringing to a close nearly 40 years of categorical funding from the state that dictated how and where money was to be spent.

The LCAP/LCFF is an attempt to move away from what researcher Michael Fullan (2011) calls the “wrong drivers of negative accountability, individualism, technology and fragmented policies, to the right drivers of capacity building, collaborative team work, pedagogy and systemic policies that stimulate shared coherence across a system” (p, 5). Fullan has partnered with The California Department of Education (CDE) to create three policy reports in 2015-2016. Most notably, California’s Golden Opportunity, a collaborative effort with multiple stakeholders that defines a coherent approach to transforming the whole system of education in California (Fullan, 2015).

**Reform Research**

The importance of studying districts engaged in transforming into learning organizations focused on continuous improvement evolved from the research on school improvement efforts. Historically, most of the reform efforts of the modern era focused on individual schools as units of change. Therefore, most research centered on identifying individual schools that show “unusual effectiveness” (Levine and Lezotte, 1995, p. 525) as compared to similar schools, and illuminating the processes those schools used in their achievement (Chrispeels & Gonzalez, Harris and Chrispeels, 2006;
Effective Schools Research

Effective schools research has a rich history, stretching back to the early 1960s, and includes both national and international studies (Teddlie & Stringfield, 2000). In their compendium of school effectiveness research Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) situate the literature into four stages, each one building on the last. During the first two stages, which occurred during the 1960s, and 1970s, respectively, researchers were primarily concerned with proving that schools did make a difference in the education of students. During stage three, from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, “effective schools correlates” were identified and utilized in improvement programs, and stage four, from the late 1980s to the present time as seen increased sophistication in research as broader measures of effectiveness were identified.

Over the course of the decades of modern school reforms, research on effective schools has grown in scope and sophistication of methodologies (Chrispeels, 1992; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). During the third and fourth stages, researchers changed their focus to move beyond identifying effective schools; they wanted their research to be used to create effective schools. According to Teddlie & Reynolds, (2000) R. Edmonds is considered the “grandfather” of effective schools research due to his work in this area.

He used his own research and the research of others to synthesize findings, identifying practices, policies and underlying assumptions common to all the studies. These came to be known as the correlates of effective schools in the literature, (Edmonds,
as cited in Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). The five correlates, so named due to their correlation with student achievement, were: strong administrative leadership, an emphasis on basic skill acquisition, high expectations for student achievement, a safe and orderly atmosphere conducive to learning, and frequent monitoring of student progress. These became known as the Five-Factor model and were the cornerstone of school reform during the late 1970s and 1980s (Marzano, 2003, Chrispeels & Gonzalez, 2006; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Despite some criticisms to the methodologies (Cuban, 1983; Ralph & Fennessey, 1983), by 1988 the re-authorizations of the ESEA saw the federal government incorporating the Five-Factor model into its legislation, tied to Title I and Title II monies (Ginsberg, 2013; USDE, n.d.).

One of the criticisms of effective schools research was the consistent use of low SES, urban schools as research pools. Critics called into questions the ability to generalize the findings, wondering if the same correlates were ‘necessary’ for other school contexts (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). In answer, researchers began designing studies that encompassed a variety of contexts, including varying SES populations (Chrispeels, 1992; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Teddlie et al., 1990). These studies began explicitly looking at the differences of school effects that occur among different school contexts (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), as well as across different schools (Johnson, 2008).

One of these was a longitudinal study of eight schools in California of low, mid and high SES population (Chrispeels, 1992). A variety of contexts were analyzed such as a) school climate; b) curriculum and instructional practices that included test data, curriculum alignment, staff development to improve instruction and time on task; c) organizational structures and procedures, including collaboration opportunities; and d)
leadership by district, principal and staff including shared vision, shared commitment and shared learning. Five years of state achievement testing data were also analyzed. The study found the school improvement undertaking had impacted five of the eight schools, with those that with the highest degree of effectiveness implementing change in all four areas. What is notable about this study, is that it also identified supports from the district that had positive effect: a) goal setting, b) aligning curriculum, c) planning staff development, d) data analysis and e) setting achievement targets. This study is unique in the effective schools literature in that it studied and drew direct connections between individual schools and the district within which they are situated.

Multiple studies in the literature recognized variance between schools implementing improvement reforms (Elmore, 1995; Hattie, 2015; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) due to conditions that hindered implementation at scale, most notably, a lack of district office support (Honig, 2008). One example is Bogatch and Brooks (1994) research that revealed that only 46% of district administrators had knowledge of programs their schools were utilizing. Another study by Berends, et al. (2002) noted that departments with the district office were fragmented in their focus, often each focused on their own area. While, Frederick Hess (1999), in a large study of midsized urban school districts, found that local school boards and superintendents consistently engage in what he calls "policy churn” (para. 3). Studies such as these brought into question the role of the district office and their part in supporting schools. The Chrispeels (1992) study is unique in that it focused on the relationship of schools and the district as a whole. Most work, and consequently most research, was done at the school level.
Districts as Units of Change

The literature of the 1990s early 2000s underscored the perceived impotence of the district office, seen as either inhibiting school reform (Archer, 2005; Supovitz, 2006), or irrelevant to instructional improvement (Honig & Rainey, 2011; Peterson, 1999). The characterization was highlighted by secretary of education William Bennett’s (1987) state of education speech referring to public school administration as “the blob”, arguing that district administrators resist change without regard to student achievement needs.

Despite the prevailing thoughts, it was becoming increasing clear that school reform was not sustaining desired results, that classroom practices were seldom changed and student achievement remained stagnant leading many researchers to conclude that they needed to look beyond improving education one school at a time (Cuban, 1996; Elmore, 1995; Goodman, 1995; Honig, 2008; Lambert, 2003). Lezotte (2008) summed this up:

Researchers found schools could not remain effective without the support of the central office. A principal and key staff could help a school improve student achievement through heroic effort, but they could not sustain the improvement or survive the departure of key leaders without the support of the district and a commitment at that level to promote effective schooling practices. (p. 28)

In addition, the re-authoring of the ESEA, called the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act radically shifted the focus of improvement. Rather than focus on improvement at the school level, the legislation used a business model, focusing on the inter-connected nature of the district as an entity (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2013; ). With this need to realize large-scale change to affect student achievement, modern researchers
set out to investigate the relationship between effective district leadership and effective districts (Chrispeels, 2002; McLaughlin & Talber, 2013; Togneri & Anderson 2003). Supovitz (2006) concluded, “The district sits at the intersection of state policy and the work of schools” (p. 11).

Two significant studies of research on district-led strategies revealed a positive relationship between specific strategies and change outcomes. Marzano and Waters (2009) analyzed 14 reports containing data from 1,210 districts to determine if there was a positive correlation between district level leadership and student achievement outcomes. Their meta-analysis found a moderately positive result. They concluded, “when district leaders carry out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement is positively affected” (p. 5). Also identified were specific leadership behaviors that positively correlated with student achievement: ensuring collaborative goal setting, establishing goals for achievement and instruction, creating board aligned and supported goals, monitoring achievement and instructional goals, and allocating resources to support goals for achievement and instruction.

Similarly, Leon (2008) summarized key findings of four large empirical studies that investigated high performing districts and the impact of district leadership on district-wide improvement efforts. The four studies analyzed were Harvard Public Education Leadership Project (2007), Springboard Schools (2006), Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (2006), and The Wallace Foundation (2005). Leon (2008) identified six best practices linked to positive student outcomes in district-wide reform efforts: leadership for learning, coherence and alignment, support through human resources, focus on instructional practices, and balanced autonomy.
Another focus of district supported change, centered on implementation of 21st century skills as outlined by the P21 group had similar findings. According to Kay and Greenhill (2013) their research found effective districts focused on: a 21st century vision, community consensus around the vision, aligned system to the vision, building professional capacity, focus of curriculum and assessments around the Four Cs of P21 Framework, motivate and support teachers, culture of continuous improvement.

These studies identified several consistent findings: setting clear goals, articulated focus on student learning, aligning curriculum and instruction with student needs, providing time and space for collaboration, and using data to guide improvements. These findings are also consistent with those found in effective schools research, indicating an alignment between the two. “The district and the school together represent a part-whole relationship” (Elmore, 2004, p. 62).

However, it is important to note that much of the current literature on effective districts has focused on the leadership practices of the district office, with little research focused on specific practices and processes that advance teaching and learning (Honig 2008; Fullan 1991). For instance, in his study of school and district leadership, Elmore (2006) found a gap between practices at the district and site levels and noted that cycles of continuous learning were important to instructional improvement at all levels and that leadership must "create conditions that value learning as both an individual and collective good" (p. 67). In order to bridge this gap in the research, many districts have turned to improvement science and systems research in efforts to work as an organization, central office together with their sites, as learning organizations (Honig, 2008).
**Improvement Science**

According to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, improvement science, as applied to education, is “explicitly designed systems to accelerate learning-by-doing. It’s a more user-centered and problem-centered approach to improving teaching and learning” (Carnegie Foundation, 2017). Improvement research is action research oriented, focused on the journey of learning, the overall goal being to develop the know-how for a reform idea in order to spread it faster and more effectively. As such it is iterative, incorporating cycles of trial, error and redesign, and is therefore referred to as a system of continuous improvement (Carnegie Foundation, 2017).

Therefore, improvement research is not so concerned with the reform, or improvement itself, but about the process of improving (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). In fact, it has been noted that a focus on the outcomes themselves often undermines the processes (Fullan, 1991; Miles, 1983). The constructs of improvement science are not new to education and proponents have included it in the general literature on reform, however it is only recently coming before a wider audience as educational organizations look for proven ways to make lasting changes (Byrk et al., 2015; Fullan, 1991. 2007, Fullan and Quinn, 2015; Honig et al., 2010; Miles, 1983).

The application of improvement science in district improvement emphasizes the district office and its schools pursuing joint learning, through ongoing cycles of learning, occurring within and across the district (Byrk, 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Honig, et al., 2010). The district office is responsible for supporting its schools through direct interactions, personnel, capacity building and monitoring of the reform (Fullan & Quinn,
Honig et al. (2010) refers to this, as “central office leadership of continual improvement is pivotal to efforts to redefine its sole organizational purpose as that of supporting teaching and learning” (p. 124)

The six core principles of improvement science are (Bryk et al. 2015)

1. Make the work problem-specific and user-centered
2. Variation in performance is the core problem to address
3. See the system that produces the current outcomes
4. We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure
5. Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry
6. Accelerate improvements through networked communities

Improvement science researchers argue that education has had little trouble identifying major problems but often lack the grasp of the complexity of problems (Byrk, Gomez & Grunow, 2010). “large societal concerns…are complex problems composed of multiple strands (with numerous embedded micro-level problems) that play out over time and often interact with one another (p. 5). They go on to argue that there is a “lack of purposeful, collective action” (p. 5), with many working theories of the same problem, resulting in innovations without any clear progress toward core concerns. In order to tackle problems in a coordinated, collective manner districts need to look to systems research.

**Systems Research**

Systems theory looks to connections between parts and to the whole (Senge, 1990). According to Anderson (2012) systems theory “has been a popular approach to understanding organizations and change, because it provides a commonsense explanation
for how organizations and their subsystems seem to us to work (p. 66). There are many specific definitions of systems theory in the literature, according to various, specific applications. However, all have at their core general systems theory (GST), which was described, by Ludwig von Bertalanffy and colleagues in the 1950s (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). As defined here, a system considers an entity within its context, with interrelated and interdependent parts; the entirety being more than the sum of its parts. In addition, active systems are dynamic; a change in one part of the system affects other parts.

**Learning Organizations**

Senge (1990) took general systems theory and applied it to human organizations, producing a seminal work recognized for developing the notion of a learning organization. In his research, he found that organizations attempting to affect change encounter natural resistance due to the current cultural conditions, and that the only way to overcome this is through inquiry and reflection of real problems, essentially requiring those within the culture to change the culture. He describes this as “people continually expanding their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). His description of learning organizations included five elements that must be present: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision and team learning.

In large-scale research of 107 managers engaged in implementing change, Ford and Greer (2005) attempted to discover if specific models of change worked more effectively. Using five variables obtained from three different prominent models, Kotter (1995), Burke and Litwin (1992), and Nadler and Tushman (1980), they measured
intended outcomes. They found that models with non-linear expectations and more complex interactions fared better than those that were more linear and sequential. In conclusion, they reinforced the complex view of change and a “unique model tailored to the organization. Such a perspective is appealing since it emphasizes the uniqueness by which each organization might approach the implementation problem” (Ford & Greer, 2005, p. 66). This finding supports both Senge’s organizational learning theory and improvement science which emphasize that dynamic systems are contextually situated and as such require local decision making in the midst of authentic problems (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990, as cited in Schaffer and McCreight; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2010; Schaffer and McCreight, 2004).

Generally applied to the business setting, Senge (2012) contends that it is systems theory with organizational learning theory that allow application to the complex systems of school districts; the two parts together allow appreciation of the organization as a dynamic process. Organizational learning has as a key tenet that the organization will improve when the organizational structure facilitates learning broadly, across the organization. This is exemplified through connections across levels and departments, active sharing of ideas and input to effect common purpose (Senge, et al. 2012; Watkins, & Marsick, 1993), and when there is deliberate focus on the learning of the group, rather than the individual (Edmondson 2002; Crossan & Berdrow, 2003).

Two other seminal works were published at the turn of the 21st century that influenced the landscape of educational reform: Ellsworth (2000) and Fullan (2000). Ellsworth produced a synthesis of current research on systemic change that advocated for a systems approach to implementing 21st century innovations in schools. His
contemporary, Fullan, was engaged in large-scale systems work with public schools in Ontario, Canada. He urged for “strong, actionable concepts in combination: capacity building, learning in context…sustainability, and systems leaders in action – leaders at all levels engaged in changing the system, changing their own context” (p. xii).

**Organizations as Socially Constructed**

The emphasis on individuals engaged with authentic problems, situated in personal contexts defines the idea of organizations as socially constructed. Senge and his colleagues’ work built on social constructivism. In this, Berger and Luckman (1967), as cited in Anderson, 2012) argue that organizations are not just the formal structure, but are created entities determined by the language and actions of its members. Anderson (2012) expounds, “it fills missing elements in systems theory…describing how members experience organizations as social environments where interaction is fundamentally how work is accomplished and sense-making is how it is understood and experienced” (p. 78).

The social construct of learning in community arises in cultures where continuous dialog and collective meaning making are valued parts of collaboration (Cooke & Yanov, 1996), and the reciprocal nature of influence is seen when “collective learning is not just the sum of individual learning” (Leithwood, 1998, p. 245). Further, Spillane and Thompson (1997) found that a district’s capacity for successful reform implementation hinged on the interaction of human capital, social capital, and financial resources. Taking the lead from the work of Senge and Spillane and Thompson, Lasky (2004) argues that, “Understanding interdependence between organizations and individuals in a policy or reform system requires research that examines the linkages across the system that connects people, resources, and organizations” (p. 3).
**Building Trust.** In order to build social capital that lasts, building relational trust must come forcefully into play. Relationships are built on trust, and this is foundational to the work across all levels of a district: district office staff, site administration, leadership teams and faculty (Byrk, Schnieder, 2002; Fullan 2001). There is a convergence in the literature around the necessity of trust to be willing to openly examine organizations shortcomings for the purpose of reform with input from all stakeholders (Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly & Chrispeels, 2008). Research indicates that high levels of organizational trust correlate with increased effort of employees to strive toward organizational goals (Kallebberg, 2002; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2004).

According to Byrk (2010) coherent improvement plans “challenge longstanding norms about teacher autonomy and a laissez-fair orientation toward professional development” (p. 27) which require mindset and cultural shifts. He notes in his longitudinal research in Chicago’s public-school system (2010), some of the most powerful data was found in the area of relational trust and its role in systems level change, including supporting the hard work of school improvement. He also found the inverse to be true; schools with low trust had weak developments across parent-community ties, professional capacity and student-centered learning climates. His recommendations are for leaders to combine empathy (a regard for vulnerability) with a compelling school vision, and allow teachers to see their behavior as advancing the vision, personal integrity is heightened and “an overall ethos conducive to building trust is likely to emerge” (p. 27).
Hattie reminds us in his work, *The Politics of Collaborative Expertise* (2015) that people bring who they are and their unique points of view to collaboration, which underscores the need for creating safe places for people to “explore ideas, make and learn from errors” (p. 27) and be able to rely on the expertise of the group to solve problems. Hattie (2015) notes that educators have embraced the ideals of cooperative collaboration for nearly two decades, yet there persists wide variance in practice within schools. He provides steps, or tasks, that describe the cyclical nature of collaborative improvements, while growing trust through a spirit of vulnerability due to the transparent nature of the design:

Task 1: Shift the narrative to one of “teamness” and professional learning  
Task 2: Secure agreement about what a year’s worth of progress looks like  
Task 3: Expect a year’s worth of progress  
Task 4: Develop assessments tools that provide feedback of teaching and learning  
Task 5: Know thy impact (as a team goal)  
Task 6: Ensure teachers have expertise in diagnosis, interventions and evaluations  
Task 7: Stop ignoring what we know and scale up success from within  
Task 8: Link autonomy to a year’s progress

The tasks listed above assume, “that there is no single simple intervention but instead there is a narrative of impact that can be shared, understood, implemented and evaluated within and across schools” (Hattie, 2015, p. 26). Similar tasks, or steps, are echoed in the literature through the research of others; Byrk, 2010, DuFour & Eaker, 1998, Ezzari, 2015, and Fullan, 2005 to name only a few.
Clearly, relational trust between staff that works within a site or department of an organization is paramount, but likewise the development of trust across traditional school and department lines is as important (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) studied trust between the district office and sites, the district office and principals, and principals and school leadership teams. They found that districts where trust was flourishing had developed high levels of human capital. Human capital is defined as “the productive skills and technical knowledge of workers. It includes … knowledge, skills, abilities and the values and motivation to apply their skills to the organization’s goals” (Milanowski & Kimball, 2010, p. 70). According to Daly & Finnigan (2012) a continual focus on development of strengths at all levels supports building trust and supports a district in “its coherent, strategic approach to improving teaching and learning” (p. 495).

**Shared Leadership**

Research suggests that another component that impact the social interaction is building the capacity of all members of a learning organization to set goals, implement and evaluate processes and outcomes and develop expertise, resulting in the development of instructional leadership at all levels (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, Fullan, 2005). Primary in most of the research on learning organizations is this element, called shared leadership (SL) (Fullan, 2007; Chrispeels, 2006; Spillane, 2006). Interchangeably called distributed leadership, Harris and Spillane (2008) describe it as a practice imperative to move organizational reform forward, while Hargreaves and Fink (2004) defined SL as shared decision-making that relies on a shared vision. Others define it more concretely as all stakeholders having a sense of agency about the organization (Harris, 2007; Spillane,
Fullan (2007) elaborates on the definition as “actively brokering, facilitating and supporting the leadership of others”. Empirical research has affirmed the relationship between SL and student performance (Dieronitou, 2014; Heck & Halliger, 2009; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004) describing it as strategy for capacity building and means to support on-going collaboration (Fullan and Quinn, 2015), resulting in a synergy of new skills and dispositions, more focused and enhanced resources, and greater shared commitment, cohesion and motivation (Fullan, 2005).

Most often, shared leadership appears in the literature focused on the relationship between principals and teachers at the site level, with little to support the idea of SL at the district office level (Hatcher, 2005; Spillane, 2002). However, with renewed efforts to build learning organizations that include the entire district, the ideals of SL between the district office and school sites is necessary. Transformational change can be an overwhelming task, with plentiful challenges. District leadership that remains cohesive and visible throughout the district and supportive of implementation efforts are needed, as is coordinated efforts to eliminate distractions and competing programs (Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2002). “The increased demand for educational reform and accountability has resulted in a renewed focus on the relationship between building and district leaders, particularly on how district leaders can support the academic success of students” (Thompson & Garcia France, 2015, p. 5).

**Collaboration through Communities of Practice**

Collaboration is found throughout the literature as the key element for building shared leadership practices through authentic, collective learning and a medium for true change to take place (Fullan and Quinn, 2015; Senge, 1990; Wenger 1998). However,
collaboration for the positive feeling of cooperative work does not define a learning organization. In the seminal work of Wenger (1998) he coined the term “communities of practice” (CoP) to describe the type of collaboration needed within organizations for learning to abound. He defines communities of practice broadly, as a group that not merely has a common interest, but develops a shared repertoire of resources, stories and tools as ways to solve problems and deepen expertise (Wenger, 2015).

Wenger identifies three foundational elements teams build: domain of knowledge, a community of people, and shared practices. The domain of knowledge is the shared learning that groups develop; that which they inquire into. Community of people is the boundary of the group; those that commit to work together to enquire and solve common problems, it also refers to the internal accountability to the group. DuFour (2004) introduced creating common norms as a way of building community in his model. Trust and respect for the community are hallmarks of this element. Shared practice is the development of resources and tools as a result of the mutual learning. This element also includes goal setting and the commitment group members are willing to make in order to try an intervention and share results. These conditions have been explored and refined by others, while remaining true to the foundation of a community of practice within a learning organization (Elmore, 2004; DuFour and Eaker, 2004; Fullan, 2010)

During the 1990s the concepts of learning organizations began changing the way school systems thought about change. Historically, teachers worked primarily in autonomous silos (Barth, 2001). To create a culture that supports risk taking, and thereby change, necessitates communication, reflection and sharing about practices. Hattie (2009) affirmed these ideas. He conducted a meta-analysis of educational research and
found that teacher collaboration around a common practice, using inquiry, had the highest effect on student learning. Byrk (2010) found similar results in his longitudinal study of Chicago’s public schools. For example, elementary schools with strong, sustained collaboration had “diminished inequities in educational achievement” (p. 26) and in his study with Driscoll (1988) of public high schools, found “teachers working within strong professional communities held higher expectations for students” (p. 197).

Like the concept of learning organizations, communities of practice came to education via the business world. Hord (1997) built on Wenger’s work in introducing the concept to education by using language that gave more specificity to the process of communities of practice. Hord (2004) identified five key elements for educators: shared values and vision, collective learning and application of the learning, supportive conditions, shared personal practice, and a supportive and shared leadership. DuFour (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) is well known in educational communities for his work in learning communities, coined as Professional Learning Communities (PLC). They refined Hord’s five areas into three: shared purpose, interdependent teams and a focus on results. These foundational elements echo the three elements of Wenger.

Of note is Hattie’s (2015) recognition that creating time and space for groups is as far as many districts have gone in structuring CoP, and that it is not sufficient to result in any notable gain for teaching and learning. He emphasizes that groups need a clear focus on “the evidence of impact, common understandings of what impact means…and how the impact is shared across many groups of students” (p. 27). This caution is echoed in Fullan’s (2011) research. He advocates not to focus on compelling teachers to work in defined groups, but to focus on building social capital and a CoP around embedded
professional learning based on mutual need and choice. In addition, he notes that this approach encourages a focus on building a learning-instruction culture within and across schools.

Knudson and Garibaldi (2015) further expanded the idea by including educators of all levels in CoP for cross-system learning. In this way, district leaders are engaged in the process with school sites, using each other’s experiences to collectively develop expertise (Hattie, 2015), in order to address challenges faced in district reform.

Learning Networks. An extension of Wenger’s work is the notion of cross-district or state level learning networks whereby districts form partnership to learn with and from each other. Their focus is to collectively explore policies, strategies and supportive actions that improve the collective whole (Fullan, 2005; Knudson & Garibaldi, 2015; Wenger, 2011). Fullan describes this as a “tri-level solution”, including learning networks at the school, district and state levels (2005, p. 211), characterizing it as a total-system focus, with capacity building across three levels to enact true transformation of the system. Wenger (2011) describes this phenomenon as “communities and networks as integral aspects of the social fabric of learning” (p.8), while Knudson & Garibaldi (2015) note that California’s political system has embraced the concept as part of its newly crafted accountability structure.

Theoretical Construct - The Coherence Framework

California’s Systemic Change

California is embracing the ideas of systemic change in its educational structures. In partnership with Michael Fullan et al. (2014) a document entitled California’s Golden Opportunity was published describing the conditions and actions necessary to enact
whole systems change. It noted that California was intentionally moving away from a focus on individual projects and grants, which are often “lost in the mass of noise in the system” (p. 2), and headed in a direction to use cohesive processes to enact transformative change. Whole system change was described according to four criteria:

1. It must include the whole system, affecting the majority of schools and students
2. It must center around new capacities, including changes in pedagogy that embrace all students
3. Policies and strategies employed must have causal and measurable impact on learning and well-being
4. It must generate widespread commitment and consistency to uplifting means and ends.

**Leadership from the Middle**

The overall strategy is labeled as ‘leadership from the middle’, whereby districts, and schools within districts become the drivers of change, based on the identified needs of their students. Thus, districts become partners with each other, their communities, counties and the state in improving teaching and learning. This structure is viewed as a shift from compliance to a capacity building relationship within the state. As such, it will require a cultural and mindset shift as the State Board of Education and California Department of Education (CDE) must work in partnership with each other, as well as professional associations and advocacy groups in support of districts (Fullan et al., 2014).

The ideals of leading from the middle are envisioned through the state’s Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plan that govern districts.
Both focus on the locus of control being the local LEA and its community. Another component envisioned is the use of learning networks, in which districts would support each other in efforts to improve (Fullan et al., 2014). The Stuart Foundation reported that 61 various networks exist in California with overlapping purposes (Hagood, 2014), including the established CORE Improvement Community of districts working on systems improvement using improvement science (CORE, 2017). Like collaborative groups at the school level, experts recognize that guidelines are needed to ensure productive implementation. While California Ed Partners is developing collaborative guidelines for the state (CCEE, 2016), and the CORE districts provide one model of a funded collaborative, there is a need for description of how districts that have created systems reform using this model have done so.

**Four Dimensions of the Framework**

Fullan’s Coherence Framework (Fullan et al., 2015) is a dynamic, interconnected description of the elements necessary for systemic change to occur. The five areas, focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, securing accountability and leadership provided a framework that guided the data analysis of this study, as well as informed the work of the Systems Leadership Collaborative, which districts within this study participated. The model sits within a definition of coherence as “the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work… through purposeful interaction among members of an organization working on a common agenda, identifying and consolidating what works and making meaning over time” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Within this definition the work on coherence had three features: 1) It involved the whole system, 2) it zeros in on effective pedagogy, and 3) It always examines impact and
the causal pathways that result in measureable progress for all students (p. 32). As such, its primary value lies in the integration and synergy of its component parts. Byrk (2011) provides an analogy to the dynamic element of system’s reform components:

You need an appropriate mix of flour, sugar, eggs, oil, baking powder, and flavoring to produce a light, delicious cake. Without sugar, it will be tasteless. Without eggs or baking powder, the cake will be flat and chewy. Marginal changes in a single ingredient — for example, a bit more flour, large versus extra-large eggs — may not have noticeable effects. But, if one ingredient is absent, it is just not a cake. (p. 26)

**Focusing direction.** Described as emanating from a collective moral purpose that defines a vision for the organization, focusing direction is centering on two or three powerful goals with clear strategies for implementation. The goals influence the strategy selected and change process the team will follow (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Senge (2006) described development of focus as the “process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its member truly desires” (p. 218). The creation of a shared vision creates a sense of purpose and defines the commitments of an organization; its ‘north star’.

**Cultivating collaborative cultures.** Working toward a collaborative culture of improvement is the foundation for the framework. The culture is described as non-judgmental, focused on the growth of participants through problem solving and action research (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Using the words of Hattie (2015), “collaboration is about cultivating the expertise of everyone, focused on collective purpose” (p. 27). Fullan has described evident coherence as “staff that can talk the walk” (2015, p. 33), that is all stakeholders are able to clearly relay the goals of improvement, strategies to get there and their own roles in the change process. Coherence grows through evolving explicitness of the goal and the change culture that grows from the work (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

**Deepening learning.** This third component defines the teaching-learning paradigm. Rather than search for the silver bullet in a program, communities of inquiry examine instruction at the learning level, that is in relation to the impact on students’ learning and well being (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).
Securing accountability. This component recognizes that external accountability, and the focus on outcomes, has led to a results mindset rather than a process, or growth mindset. The re-focus here is to use internal accountability focused on growth in order to promote true change in practice (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Byrk (2009) describes this as the ability to “create usable knowledge about practice” (p. 599) through defining ‘it’ specifically, testing it, refining it and describing its impact.

Leadership. The role of leadership is at the center of this framework. It is considered the glue that connects the other pieces of the coherence framework. Leadership is developed at all levels to enhance and promote the voice and expertise of all involved (Wolf, 2011). Leadership becomes the igniter of reform as it acts on the other four elements (Byrk, 2010). Fullan & Quinn (2015) conclude that reform efforts are doomed if leadership resides within one level; “people come and go, circumstances change, coherence making is never ending” (p. 34).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter explored a historical perspective of reform movements in the United States and California and their impact on the current state of public school systems. In addition, current initiatives in educational reform research were explored in relation to the current conditions and need for transformation. A synthesis matrix aided the researcher in organizing published literature and identifying key variables and seminal works for this study (see Appendix A). It was discovered that many opportunities for sustainable reform have been proven, and are being brought together in the current movement within California. Missing from the description of ‘what’ are models within California school districts that provide the ‘how’ for others to follow.
As a result of the literature analysis, it was determined that creating coherent systems in transforming to a learning organization is a complex process that includes barriers, needed systems of supports and shared leadership practices. In addition, a theoretical foundation was described that frames the components of the complexities of a learning organization in order to provide validity and significance of this phenomenological research. The application of a coherence framework will provide a theoretical lens to represent each component experienced by districts in transforming to learning organizations focused on continuous improvement. An evident gap of research describing the ways in which California districts are able to transform themselves during this new era of educational reform was established, providing relevance and value of this study which seeks to share the lived experiences districts engaged in transformation through the Systems Leadership Collaborative.

Chapter III describes the methodology used in this phenomenological study. Chapter IV, reporting results and findings of the study, including a description of the barriers and successful strategies districts employed. Conclusions and recommendations of the study are provided in Chapter V.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

We know that our work, to successfully realize our mission, must focus on building the capacity of California educators and the systems that support them. The framework must focus on… the “right drivers”: Developing systemic solutions to create a coherent and positive education system. (Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0, 2015, p. 3)

Overview

This research study focused on describing the experiences of school districts that participated in the two-year Systems Leadership Collaborative. Chapter I focused on providing the context of the research study, including the background to the research and organization of the study. Chapter II reviewed the literature pertaining to public schools’ need for continuous improvement, systems coherence, and communities of practice. This chapter explains the methodology used for the research study. The purpose statement and research questions are presented, along with the research design, population, and sample. Research instruments, methods of collection and data analysis are described in detail. The final section of the chapter addresses the limitations of the study, assumptions related to methodology and ethical procedures used to protect subjects of the study, as well as steps taken to increase reliability and validity (Cresswell, 2007).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of district implementation teams that created and implemented district systems of continuous improvement as part of the California Systems Leadership Collaborative using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability.
In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe the successes and barriers district implementation teams encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement.

**Central Research Question**

This phenomenological study was guided by the following Research Question:

*How do district leadership teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences in terms of creating coherent systems of continuous improvement, implementing systems of continuous improvement, successes achieved, and barriers encountered?*

**Research Sub-Questions**

1. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of creating systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

2. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of implementing systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

3. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the success they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?
4. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the barriers they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?

**Research Design**

Based on the purpose and research questions of this study, a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry framework was selected. At its core, phenomenology explores how individuals or groups “make sense of experiences and transform those experiences into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patten, 2015, p. 115). Further, phenomenology as a methodological framework “aims to capture the essence of program participants’ experiences” (Patton, p. 116) through describing their lived experiences with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004; Krueger, 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A phenomenon may take many forms: an experience, state of being, or membership in an organization all signify (Krueger, 2015; Patton, 2015). The intent of this research was to describe the lived experiences of district implementation teams regarding the phenomenon of participation in a two-year, state-wide learning network while building coherent systems and changing mindsets within their organization. Therefore, a phenomenological framework was an appropriate research design for this study.

While all qualitative methods, “inquire into, document and interpret the meaning-making process” (Patton, 2015) phenomenological studies center on the essence of shared meanings created through the experience of the phenomenon (Krueger, 2015; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2015) including the important aspect of context, as Seidman (2013) explains: “Phenomenological theory….allows both the interviewer and participant to
explore the participant’s experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning” (p. 20). The result of using a phenomenological methodology was the ability to understand with depth and detail the lived experiences of members of multiple district implementation teams within their context to determine shared meanings. Data were collected through interviews and artifacts.

The ‘profound interview’ is the recommended method of data-gathering in phenomenological studies (Kruger, 2015; Seidman, 2013). Moreover, Merriam (2009) posits that it is more “an interchange of views between two persons conversing” where the researcher “understands the experience from the subject’s point of view” (p. 1-2). Patton (2015) concurs, noting that the stories and words of participants should be the focus of data gathering. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with district and site level members of implementation teams were conducted to obtain various points of view (see Appendix C). Through the use of semi-structured interviews the researcher was able to examine the depth and nuances of implementation as perceived at both the district and site levels, allowing for comparison of experiences within and across districts. The interviews were coded and the resulting themes used as data. In addition, district implementation plans were collected as artifacts, analyzed and coded. The use of interviews from multiple points of view within a district and artifacts allowed for triangulation of data, a process Creswell (2007) describes as providing a more robust picture of the experiences and providing validation of the information.

**Population**

As defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), “A population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria
and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research” (p. 129). Using this definition, the population of this study was public school districts in the state of California striving to achieve systems of continuous improvement as described in the *Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0*. In response to the California State Board of Education’s oversight and accountability model adopted in 2016, districts are being urged to re-evaluate how they operate, “developing systemic solutions to create a coherent and continuous improvement system” (*Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0*, 2015, p. 3). The Blueprint also urged districts to work in collaborative learning networks as they plan to transform their systems. Using this definition, the 1025 public school districts in California are the population.

**Target Population**

Creswell (2007) defines the target population as “the actual list of sampling units from which the sample is selected” (p. 393). In this study, district implementation teams that participated in the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC) were the target population. The SLC was a learning network of 14 school districts from both Northern and Southern California that met three times per year during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years for the purpose of examining their current state, creating and implementing coherent systems and transforming their districts into learning organizations focused on cycles of continuous improvement.

**Sample**

Creswell (2007) further defined a sample as a smaller group within the target population that the researcher plans to study, and ideally is representative of the population. For this study, a sample of the target population was selected using purposive
sampling. According to Merriam (2009), phenomenological research generally uses a purposive sampling, characterized by the inclusion of specific criteria that participants meet at the time of selection. The inclusion of specific criteria for the sample ensures that participants had common experiences regarding the phenomenon studied, allowing rich understanding to develop (Groenewald, 2004; Kruger, 1988).

The criteria used to identify participants within the target population were:

1. Districts with implementation teams that participated in the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC).
2. Implementation planning teams that participated in the SLC for the full two years.
3. Implementation planning team that consisted of both central office and site levels members.
4. Districts that constructed implementation plans for systems of continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework.

Using these criteria, seven districts were identified. The seven districts each had implementation teams with seven to ten members. In order to conduct in-depth interviews to yield rich, descriptive experiences, there was a need to reduce the sample size further. In determining the ideal sample size, the literature recommends considering depth vs. breadth (Seidman, 2013) with three to ten participants (Patton, 2015). Creswell (1998, p. 113) concurs, recommending “long interviews with up to 10 people” for phenomenological studies. With this in mind, four districts were selected as the sample for this study using convenience sampling of the qualified districts in order to increase access to the participants. Convenience sampling is a sampling system that uses the
researcher’s access to participants as the criteria for selection (Patton, 2015). Within each district, the intent was to obtain various perspectives by interviewing multiple members of each team. Each district implementation team to be interviewed consisted of six to eight members, representing teachers, site administrators, district administrators and superintendents, for a total of 28 participants.

**Sample Selection Process**

For the purpose of this study, purposive and convenience sampling were used to select participants. To initiate the process, a director of the Systems Leadership Collaborative was contacted to discuss the study, its purpose and determine eligibility of districts based on the purposeful criteria. The following steps were used to determine the final sample.

1. The facilitator of the Systems Leadership Collaborative identified districts that met the criteria.
2. All qualified district implementation team leads were sent a Letter of Invitation explaining the study and their participation (see Appendix D).
3. Districts who met the criteria and agreed to participate were listed and four were conveniently selected by the researcher based on access to the participants.
4. The four districts were sent an Informed Consent and Confidentiality Assurance notification via email, as well as a Participant’s Bill of Rights (see Appendix E and F).
5. For each district that agreed to participate, a personal phone call, followed by an email was used to confirm date, time and location for interviews.
6. Within each district, interviews with multiple implementation team members were requested in order to engage multiple perspectives from both district and site levels.

The four districts represented the diversity of public schools in California, seen in table 1.

Table 1

**Characteristics of Participating Districts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
<th>District C</th>
<th>District D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Northern CA Rural</td>
<td>Northern CA Urban</td>
<td>Southern CA Suburban</td>
<td>Southern CA Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades Served</td>
<td>TK-12</td>
<td>TK-12</td>
<td>TK-12</td>
<td>TK-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>6,579</td>
<td>16,539</td>
<td>53,739</td>
<td>6,075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Instrumentation**

In qualitative research the researcher is considered the primary instrument of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Merriam, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). This lends itself to bias from the researcher since personal understanding of the phenomenon may influence the data (Patton, 2015, Siedman, 2013). In phenomenological research reduction is used to intentionally suspend or suppress judgments of the phenomenon by the researcher, instead viewing the event as something that is “emerging” (Merriam 2009, Patton, 2015). Bracketing is also used, which according to Moustakas (1994) is defined as the “researcher ‘bracketing’ her own preconceptions and entering into the experience of another using ‘self’ as an experiencing interpreter” (p. 85). In this study, the researcher works in the field of education, which could lead to preconceived ideas that will need to be bracketed.
**Semi-Structured Interviews**

According to Patton (2015) the trustworthiness of the researcher can be established through careful selection of interview questions. The use of a semi-structured interview is one way to allow the lived experiences of others to emerge while providing some structure to build rapport. In semi-structured interviews, only a few open-ended questions, directly related to the research questions are used, allowing both the interviewer and the participant to explore themes and responses as they arise (Creswell, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2009). According to Moustakas, “the phenomenological interview involves an informal interactive process…aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person’s experience” (1994, p. 114). In this way, the researcher aims to describe the essence of the lived phenomenon in concrete and descriptive terms without “causal explanations or interpretive generalizations” (Adams & Van Manen, 2008, p. 618 in Patton, 2015).

An interview protocol was developed to gather descriptive data from participants (see Appendix C). Each interview question was designed to align to the four quadrants of the Coherence Framework (focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability), and to elicit in-depth reflection on experiences as they related directly with the broader research questions. Table 2 shows the alignment of the research questions with the interview questions, the purpose of the question and supporting literature.
Table 2
Alignment of Research Questions to Interview Questions and Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Purpose of Question</th>
<th>Literature Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of <em>creating systems</em> of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework?</td>
<td>What led to the decision to create coherent systems? What are the different groups or teams of your system? Follow-up questions: What <em>focus</em> guides the system? How was it determined? How is it articulated? How would you describe <em>collaboration</em> across your system? How do the different groups overlap? How would you describe the system of <em>‘continuous improvement’</em> for learning?</td>
<td>Description of their system and how it works within and across the district in relation to the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability</td>
<td>Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson &amp; Daly, 2008; Elmore, Forman, Stoich &amp; Bocala, 2014; Fullan &amp; Quinn, 2015; Honig &amp; Hatch, 2004.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of <em>implementing systems</em> of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework?</td>
<td>Describe how you implemented systems change: Who was involved to begin with? How has the transformation grown or evolved over time?</td>
<td>Description of processes and steps taken to implement change, timelines used. Which Coherence Framework components implemented</td>
<td>Fullan &amp; Hargreaves, 2011; Honig 2008; Kasmarick, 2011; Senge, 1990; Watkins &amp; Marsick 1993.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the success they encountered on</td>
<td>Describe successes or breakthroughs you have had: How have they propelled your journey?</td>
<td>Description of specific breakthroughs, how accomplished, impact on the</td>
<td>Fullan, 2014; Johnson, Marietta, Higgins Mapp &amp; Grossman, 2015; Mele, Pels &amp; Polese, 2010;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the barriers they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?</td>
<td>Describe any barriers have you faced: What impact did they have and how did you overcome them?</td>
<td>Description of specific barriers and steps taken (if any) to overcome</td>
<td>Moursheed, Chijioke, &amp; Barber, 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reliability**

The reliability of an instrument is the degree to which it is able to produce consistent results. Issues of reliability were addressed to maintain the expectation of credibility that is implied in research through use of expert review and field tests, transcribing interviews (Kruger, 2015; Merriam, 2009) and utilizing inter-coder reliability processes (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2004).

**Field test.** Prior to use of the interview questions, a review was conducted. An expert in the field, involved in leading the SLC, reviewed the questions using the purpose statement and research questions as benchmarks to determine appropriateness of the instrument (Seidham, 2013). The questions were administered to others in the field of education to determine if they would elicit conversation and evaluated as to their use of language and appropriateness in answering the research questions (Patton, 2015). Additionally, the researcher was given feedback on interview skills, such as building rapport, encouraging interviewees to share their stories, and use of follow up questions to elicit greater depth in experience descriptions.

**Transcription of data.** During data collection, transcription of the recorded interviews was used in order to have an accurate written record that could be examined.
multiple times during analysis (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2013; Seidham, 2013).

Following data collection, data was triangulated by comparing transcribed interviews at various levels within each district, representing differing points of view, and analysis of written reflections and collected implementation plans. Each of these in concert with the others strengthens the internal reliability of the results (Creswell, 2013, Patton, 2015).

**Inter-coder reliability.** To enhance the credibility of the data collected, a peer researcher collaborated on coding a portion of the data to assure calibration of emerging themes (Lombard, et al., 2004; Seidham, 2013). The process of inter-coder reliability signifies that a minimum of 10% of the data be double coded by separate researchers until 80% or higher agreement is reached in the coding, with 90% being preferable (Lombard, et al., 2004).

**Validity**

The content validity references whether the measures are able to provide accurate and useable data that is directly aligned to the questions they are designed to answer (Patton, 2015). Since the primary instrument of data collection is the researcher using open-ended, semi-structured questioning, validity will in large part depend on the skills of the researcher. In addition, triangulation, a technique that facilitates validation of data through cross verification from two or more sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009; Patton, 2015) was used. Steps to increase this study’s validity included:

1. Interviewing skills were evaluated as part of the field test by a peer researcher.

   Feedback on delivery of questions, pacing and follow up questioning was given to assure consistency and accuracy toward the research purpose.
2. An expert panel reviewed the interview questions prior to their implementation. This was an iterative process to assure that the questions were appropriate to the research questions and study purpose, as well as that appropriate language was used that would encourage description that belonged solely to the interviewee.

**Data Collection**

In order to paint an authentic picture of the experiences of districts engaged in coherence making as part of the Systems Leadership Collaborative, semi-structured interviews and artifacts were used as data collection methods. To begin the study, application for research with humans or animals was submitted to the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). Following approval (see Appendix B) phone calls and follow-up emails were sent to the four participant districts to arrange interviews during the month of December 2017 (see Appendix D).

**Interviews**

Seidman (2015) asserts that reflecting and recounting narratives has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experiences. The research and data collections process consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, accurate transcriptions and expert-peer review to ensure accurate data and conclusions (Merriam, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Participants were interviewed following the steps outlined below:

1. Personal phone call followed by email with an outline of the purpose of the study was sent to the lead of the four sample district implementation teams to invite them into the research.
2. Within each district, interviews with two or three implementation team members were requested in order to engage multiple perspectives from the district and site levels.

3. Individual participants were confirmed and sent a formal consent for interview, and procure time and location for interviews.

4. The interview questions were electronically sent to all participants upon confirmation and again one week prior to the interview as a reminder.

5. Just prior to each interview, participants were informed the interviews would be recorded and assured their confidentiality. Participants’ identity was protected by using pseudonyms. In addition, participants were assured they would receive the transcript of the interview for their review before used by the researcher (Seidman, 2015).

6. All interviews were recorded using the digital transcription on two devices. Following the interview, the digital file was submitted to an online transcription service, which produced a pdf. document of the interview. This was emailed to the researcher.

7. Interview transcriptions were emailed to each participant to review for accuracy, allowing each participant a second look at both the questions and their answers in order to clarify or add onto the original document.

8. Following approval by each participant, the researcher used NVivo coding software to identify themes that directly correlate to the research questions, looking for shared essences in experiences (Patton, 2015).
9. Transcripts were double coded by a peer researcher using inter-coder reliability (Lombard et al., 2004) and then themes were peer reviewed for relevance to the research questions and purpose to increase validity and reliability (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015).

Artifacts

Artifacts were collected and used in support of the interviews to provide a richer picture of each district’s experience. Artifacts that pertain to the districts’ experience provided triangulation to support the study’s validity (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Artifacts were collected in the procedure below:

1. Requests to view each district’s implementation plan created during the Systems Leadership Collaborative work was emailed as part of the pre-interview packet.

2. Participants were encouraged to bring any supporting artifacts, such as charts, pictures, brochures that directly related to the experience. These were scanned for future analysis by the researcher.

3. Artifacts were analyzed using the NVivo research and coding software for emergent themes and peer reviewed for accuracy.

Forms with any participant identification and data both digital and written were stored in locked cabinets. All documents, both digital and written, were shredded and destroyed following the completion of the study.
Data Analysis

The researcher used a simplified version of a 5-step process Creswell (2013) described to elucidate phenomenological analysis using the transcribed interviews and artifacts collected:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction – The researcher describes her own experience with the phenomenon of study to identify personal judgments and preconceptions. Bracketing is a necessary process before each of the steps below.

2. Delineating units of meaning – The process of listing each of the relevant quotes from participants into topics. The researcher is answering the question: what are the participants saying?

3. Clustering units of meaning to form themes – The researcher groups the relevant topics into units of meaning.

4. Summarizing each interview, including “ad verbatim” quotes and structural descriptions of context – The researcher looks at the overall experience, including context.

5. Extracting general and unique themes from all interviews and compiling a composite summary – In this last step the researcher uses all the information to identify the essence of the phenomenon. What are the common elements repeated in each participant?

The data was prepared for analysis by having the collected audio files transcribed by a third-party. These were, in turn, emailed to each participant for review and revision. Artifacts collected were logged and scanned. After data was organized, the researcher
took time to read, reflect, read again and allow overall structures and impressions to coalesce into a general meaning. It is a powerful method when studying a particular phenomenon as a “method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data” (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003, p. 78). The data was then formally coded into patterns that became broad categories, subcategories, themes and finally assertions (Merriam, 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2003). The data coding process included three steps:

1. Codes were scanned for themes. Specifically, since the districts used the Coherence Framework to organize their work within the Systems Leadership Collaborative, the four domains of this framework were used to organize the emerging themes.

2. Codes were examined for frequencies. NVivo software allowed frequencies to become immediately apparent. Common experiences became apparent through examining frequencies, allowing strength of themes to emerge.

3. Codes were synthesized according to themes and frequencies. The repetition and strength of themes provided information as to areas that resonated across participants, bringing another aspect of understanding to the lived experiences of districts, including the shared understandings and meaning making.

4. Artifacts were aligned with themes as a method of reinforcing and triangulating the data received and coded.

Ultimately, the Coherence Framework (CF) lensed the emergent themes. Each district used the four domains of the CF in participation with the Systems Leadership Collaborative, and subsequently, was the foundation their experiences were built around.
Analyzing the emergent themes through the four domains of the CF provided greater understanding to their shared experiences, as well as provided a context to understand the successes and barriers each encountered. In chapter IV of this study, the findings related to the CF will be discussed.

**Limitations**

All research studies have limitations (Patton, 2015). That is, the ability to generalize the findings to a greater audience is limited due to methodology or design. Phenomenological studies are by their nature limited; sample participants are selected due to their experience with common phenomena, with an emphasis on discovering and describing common experiences. The exact context would be difficult to replicate or generalize to the larger population.

Other limitations within the study include the relatively small sample size compared to the larger population, and the self-reporting nature of interviews. The level of open and complete description of experiences by participants can limit the data collected, and therefore the findings. An additional limitation is the researcher as an instrument of data collection and analysis. The researcher of this study works in the field of education and there is a danger of unintentional bias or interpretation not consistent with the shared experiences of participants. According to Patton (2015), it is important for researchers to acknowledge limitations in order to intentionally design elements to mitigate them as described earlier in this chapter.

**Summary**

Chapter III provided a detailed description of this phenomenological study. The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of district implementation teams
creating systems of continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework as part of the Systems Leadership Collaborative. The research purpose, questions and design model provided a focus for the study to explore and describe the lived experiences of the participants. The data collection and data analysis model were described in detail, along with a discussion of their reliability and validity. Chapter IV will describe the findings from this study.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

“The California Way is not speedy. Changing a school district from a culture of compliance to a culture of continuous improvement will test the patience of our political system, but we know that the alternative doesn't work” Tom Torlakson, CA State Superintendent of Schools in A Blueprint for Greatness 2.0, (2015, p. 4).

Overview

Chapter I provided a rationale for this study along with background for the research. Chapter II set a context for the study through the review of current literature pertaining to elements of the study, such as a historical look at educational reform, learning organizations and a framework for transformation. Chapter III introduced the methodology used in this narrative phenomenological study of four diverse California districts engaged in transforming their systems. This chapter reviews the purpose of the research, the questions of the study, the data collection process and a description of the participants in the study. The chapter also includes an in depth synthesis of the finding of the research relative to the research questions, identifying themes and patterns that emerged, concluding with a summary of the findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of district implementation teams that created and implemented district systems of continuous improvement as part of the California Systems Leadership Collaborative using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability.
In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe the successes and barriers district implementation teams encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement.

**Central Research Question**

This phenomenological study was guided by the following Research Question:

*How do district teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences in terms of creating coherent systems of continuous improvement, implementing systems of continuous improvement, successes achieved, and barriers encountered?*

**Research Sub-Questions**

1. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of creating systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

2. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of implementing systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

3. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the success they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?
4. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the barriers they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?

**Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

A qualitative, phenomenological method was used to explore the lived experiences of districts that endeavored to transform their systems and practices into learning organizations during their two-year participation in the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC) learning network. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with multiple members of each district team to examine the depth and nuances of implementation as perceived at both the district and site levels. Interviews were transcribed and verified by participants, then uploaded into NVivo 11 software to assist with identifying themes and patterns. The four elements of the coherence framework were used as a guide for coding, to ascertain if districts used these as organizing principles in their journey. As transcripts were analyzed line-by-line, themes emerged and were coded.

The Coherence Framework was used as a theoretical guide and lens through which creation and implementation of systems of continuous improvement was studied. The SLC had used this framework extensively with districts designing transformation and was therefore it was considered an appropriate lens to view implementation. The Framework shaped the interview questions as the primary inquiry method.

In addition, districts’ implementation plans were collected as artifacts, analyzed and coded. The use of interviews from multiple points of view and artifacts allowed for triangulation of data.
Population

As defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), “A population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research” (p. 129). Using this definition, the population of this study was 1025 public school districts in the state of California striving to achieve systems of continuous improvement as described in the *Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0*. For this study, districts that had implementation teams that participated in the SLC learning network were the target population. The SLC consisted of districts from both Northern and Southern California that met three times per year during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years for the purpose of transforming their districts into learning organizations focused on cycles of continuous improvement.

Sample

Creswell (2007) defined a sample as a smaller group within the target population that the researcher plans to study, ideally representative of the population. For this study, a sample of the target population was selected using purposive sampling that included the following criteria to ensure that participants had common experiences regarding the phenomenon studied:

1. Districts with implementation teams that participated in the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC).
2. Implementation planning teams that participated in the SLC for the full two years.
3. Implementation planning team that consisted of both central office and site levels members.
4. Districts that constructed implementation plans for systems of continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework.

Using these criteria, seven district teams were identified, each comprised of six to eight members. In order to conduct in-depth interviews, there was a need to reduce the sample size further. In determining the ideal sample size, the literature recommends considering depth vs. breadth (Seidman, 2013) with three to ten participants (Patton, 2015). Creswell (1998, p. 113) concurs, recommending “long interviews with up to 10 people” for phenomenological studies. With this in mind, convenience sampling was used to select four districts as the sample for this study. Each district implementation team interviewed consisted of four to seven members, for a total of 28 participants, representing teachers, site administrators, district administrators and superintendents.

**Demographic Data**

The four districts selected represented the diversity of public schools in California, as seen in table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades Served</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TK-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the makeup of implementation teams included both school site and district level personnel. This was represented in the interviews, providing a variety of perspectives. Figure 3 shows the composition of each team.

![Figure 3. Composition of District Implementation Teams. This figure shows the number of people on each implementation team that hold various positions within the district.](image)

**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The data presented in this chapter are the result of a comprehensive process that included interviews of both groups and individuals and reviews of artifacts. In order to determine characteristics of systems transformation and implementation that may be helpful on a larger scale, the researcher was heavily interested in the cumulative findings of the data rather than extracting patterns from any one source. In order to validate the data, it was triangulated through multiple sources of information, including various levels within districts (Creswell, 2002).

**Identification of Key Themes**

Following an initial scan of all the data, a preliminary list of themes was created in NVivo 11. Themes were based on the frequency of terms found, first in interviews,
then corroborated in artifacts. An additional researcher was used to review the interviews artifacts and generate a list of themes. These lists of themes were compared and discussed. From this discussion, an initial list of 11 themes was identified, and was eventually condensed to eight as similar themes were subsumed. During the coding process, two themes were referenced much more than the others; a deeper analysis found that breaking these into child codes made the data more meaningful. Table 4 lists the eight parent themes and two child themes along with their source and frequencies tabulations.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Changing the culture or mindset</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Leading from the middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Creating a narrow focus is a priority</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Creating systems to support our priority</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Communication between sites and the district</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Using data to make decisions</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Building internal capacity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Change Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Barriers encountered along the way</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Successes that mark progress</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>264</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these themes was filtered through the lens of the theoretical framework that was used for this research study. The Coherence Framework, outlined in Fullan and Quinn’s (2015) work, defines five components, Focusing Direction, Cultivating a
Collaborative Culture, Deepening Learning, Securing Accountability and Leadership, as a model to understand and communicate about the processes of coherence and continuous improvement. In addition, the SLC network used the framework to guide the change process for districts. In the literature, as well as work with the SLC, the authors noted the framework consists of interlocking components; meaning, that while separated for descriptive purposes, they work together in a synergistic fashion in healthy learning organizations. Likewise, it was found that some of the emerged themes cross framework components, though with a different intent. Also of note is that themes 7 and 8, “barriers encountered” and “successes” are applicable across all components. Table 5 outlines how the emerged themes (by number) correspond to the Coherence Framework.

Table 5

*Themes Corresponding To Theoretical Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fullan and Quinn’s Coherence Framework (2015)</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focusing Direction</strong>: A few, deep, purposeful goals that lead the organization</td>
<td>2, 2a, 3, 7, 8,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultivating Collaborative Cultures</strong>: Non-judgmental, focused on growth, collective efficacy, shared leadership at all levels</td>
<td>1, 1a, 3, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deepening Learning</strong>: Collective inquiry into instructional practices that impact student learning</td>
<td>1, 5, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Securing Accountability</strong>: Collective responsibility for impact on student learning, acting for continuous improvement</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong>: Centered as the ‘glue’ that impacts all areas, using push/pull to internalize the framework throughout the organization</td>
<td>6, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the data from all districts illuminated themes reflected in each of the Coherence Framework components, however, themes 1 and 2 were referenced far more prevalently in all sources. Broadly, these themes relate to the Focusing Direction and
Cultivating Collaborative Cultures components of the Coherence Framework. Figure 4 is a visual representation of the emerged themes from all sources, listing the number of frequencies found in the data.

*Figure 4.* Emerged Themes with Corresponding Frequencies

Following an analysis of the overall patterns that emerged and how they correlated to the Coherence Framework, a deeper examination was completed that centered on the lived experiences of creating and implementing systems of coherence through the lens of the Coherence Framework.

**Focusing Direction**

Focusing Direction includes the elements of building collective purpose across the organization tied to a deep moral purpose that drives goals, targeting specific strategies that will influence your goals and using change leadership to influence and mobilize people (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Focusing Direction was an area that all sources were committed to and spoke of as a driving force in their current actions. The elements of themes, 2, 3, 7 and 8 describe its facets.
Theme 2: Creating a narrow focus is a priority. Creating focus was a major theme. With 66 references, the theme represents 26% of the data collected. Priority is a key word for this theme. All four districts spoke of the need for greater focus as a part of their genesis for working with the SLC. Each district described different sets of circumstances that led to their acknowledged need to transform their organization, yet similarly, 3 of the 4 used the term “laser-like focus” to describe the need itself. The idea of organizational “clutter” reduction was noted in respondents’ answers. The superintendent of District B’s comment summarized this succinctly:

The need for systems and a common focus was obvious. People were working in silos, isolated. Nothing was clearly articulated. We knew we had good schools, doing many good things, but nothing was shared. We knew we needed something so we can begin talking of these things across the entire district.

District C expressed the same sentiment and need to create a unifying focus by tying it to organizational moral purpose:

One could say there was a lot of variability across our district, across the schools, and what we learned is as we went into the schools and observed classrooms there was probably even more variability, in some cases, from classroom to classroom. Moving a school district forward when you’re looking at equity and closing the achievement gap you want to reduce that variability and provide the best learning experiences for all students.

In addition, all four districts discussed the California Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) as impetuses for transformation, and a need for common language. District D summed up the sentiment:
The LCAP is big. The year before we were really focused on how do we use it as a strategic plan and how do we communicate the goals. It felt like too many checkboxes needing to be ticked all at once. It was hard to get everyone to see how all the pieces fit together. Now, we have a small number of district goals tied to student learning that support the intent of the LCAP. It’s allowed schools to have a common language. So, as we learn more and work together more it’s just becoming much more laser focused.

**Theme 2a: Creating systems to support our priority.** Nearly half (32/66) of the references under ‘creating a focus’ were sub-categorized into creating systems to support the focus of the organization. Districts spoke of bringing together district level teams to use strategies, such as Reduce, Reframe, Remove, to take a look at their excessive programs, reading books by Fullan and Marzano on systems work, and rethinking organizational structures to support communication and alignment.

All four districts, regardless of size, described the need to create smaller groups, made up of both district level and site level personnel, in order to facilitate deep conversations that flowed from the district office to sites and back again. District D described this, “Structurally, the district has reorganized into regional cohorts that meet regularly to sustain our collective learning.” While District A noted: “Conversations became more focused and powerful when we added teachers to our district team. Information flows back and forth - I think that was key”.

In addition, three of the four districts noted that in their assessment of systems, they realized principals were often not part of discussions. Each described a new structure, a principal collaboration, different than the traditional principals meetings, to
support coherence across the district. District D gave a succinct definition: “The principal collaborations are new. In the past we had principal meetings, but they were managerial meetings. With these meetings we're trying to really target the district focus and how it intersects with our school focus areas. It just aligns everything”.

Beyond district teams, and principal collaboratives, all four districts described either a formation or renewal of site-based leadership teams (SLT) and teacher teams. Each outlined a different process for meeting and communicating yet all described a similar function and purpose. District C described this as a need to communicate the district focus from the “boardroom all the way to the classroom”. District D described the function and purpose, “Site leadership teams have developed a CIM (continuous improvement model) to address school site goals which are clearly aligned with district goals and identified student success indicators”. District B summed this up with “create a vision, get the right people on board, involve as many as possible in the planning and roll out and communicate, communicate, communicate!”

**Theme 3: Communication between sites and district.** Communication was a targeted part of theme 1. However, its importance in a coherent system is underscored by the additional 24 references noted through 8 sources. Districts used wording such as “empowerment”, “intentionality” and “transparency”, as well as “barrier” and “obstacle” in describing communication, which will be seen again in theme 7, Barriers.

In terms of the framework, “clarity” was used to describe the goal of communication. As a goal, it was further developed 1) through tenacious use of focus and, 2) by the act of participating in systemic structures, the structure providing greater shared clarity and understanding. Data showed that all four districts are working toward
clarity using the strategies listed above, with two reporting more success than the others. Clarity did not seem to correlate with size of the district, as one small and one large district see communication as a major obstacle.

District D described the importance of making sure focus, or goals, are broadly known, “This plan was communicated to all stakeholder groups including board, parent, staff”. Shifting to describe clarity between sites and the district office, District D reported, “They (district administrators) are at our sites a lot, they will even ask to come use a strategy so they know it. So, if there’s something that we need or a barrier of some sort they already know what’s going on. District C echoed the thought:

*Our SLT is the empowerment of teachers to say ‘this is our focus’. This is what we need to help our students grow – and it’s listened to!”* (A district administrator added on to the conversation) “Yes, what we’ve learned is that the principals are able to communicate to the district information that they have learned from their leadership teams back at their sites and from the individual teachers in the classroom and from the students.”

**Theme 7: Barriers encountered along the way.** Barriers were an area all districts were directly asked about, resulting in 16 total references from all 4 sources. As noted above in theme 3, communication is a common barrier that appeared, appearing in 7 out of 16 references. Two districts in particular saw communication as a distinct barrier, while the other two offered cautionary ‘warnings’ on its importance.

In addition, 5 out of the 16 references noted that the aspect of time was a barrier to both focus and coherence. Below are quotes indicating significance:
• (Principal) We’re seeing the importance of having the right people; they might be great teachers themselves, but they might not necessarily be the people who can really communicate the message or feel comfortable taking that back and sort of stepping in leadership roles.

• (Assistant Superintendent) Our biggest challenge is, how do you communicate to the teacher side and to the admin side so everybody understands why something happened or what you’re dealing with.

• (Superintendent) To move everyone - all the schools together - in this the journey of coherence takes time and so we have to figure out a way to balance the sense of urgency along with patience.

• (Teacher) Our biggest barrier is always our time and our energy, and collaborative work takes a lot of time and it takes a lot of energy and you have to be willing to put in that time.

Theme 8: Successes that mark progress. More successes were shared in the Focusing Direction area than any other. Twelve of the 15 references were about the progress districts have made in creating systems and building clarity of purpose. These are noted by the quotes below:

• (Teacher) We (the SLT) are very excited and proud because our plan is basically seen as the heart of the school whereas before it was district decided and given and it trickled downward. And then telling us that this is your role to lead your school, to lead the teachers on your team with the district and your principal support. We basically felt respected and trusted and really feel honored as professionals.
• *(Principal)* How cool is getting to see your school focus in action, and the staff taking ownership? That's the future.

• *(Assistant Superintendent)* We see, or hear, successes when you're, say, walking around a room and listening to the principals – before a meeting’s even begun - engaged in conversation about the work and you hear a common language.

Creating Collaborative Cultures

Creating Collaborative Cultures is closely linked with Focusing Direction in the Framework; the act of determining a focused direction leads to collaboration around the focus area, which begins to shift culture through collective meaning-making (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). In this research study, this complementary aspect was demonstrated with 72 references from 9 sources, capturing 29% of the data – similar to the 26% given to Focusing Direction. The Creating Collaborative Cultures component of the Coherence Framework describes cultivation of a growth mindset, building capacity of everyone in an organization to lead through a collaborative framework, and engaging in collective inquiry to learn from the work itself. These elements are connected to themes 1, 1a, 3, 7 and 8.

**Theme 1: Changing the culture or mindset.** Creating a mindset that is non-judgmental, focused on continued growth was prevalent in the data. It is a major theme, being the most referenced with 55 references across all 9 sources. Districts spoke of its importance in laying a foundation for transformation to begin, even while it is also a goal of transformational work. District D explains it this way:
Relational capacity is key, trust and transparency between stakeholders has to be developed. The work we engage in needs to value all involved. By doing this, those in leadership roles become ‘lead learners’ alongside their staff. In turn, a growth mindset set on continuous improvement develops. This collective efficacy - at every facet - was challenged to reflect and change, not just one area (district or school level).

Further, both District C and A noted that as a priority strategy for learning organizations, collaboration should be seen as a primary focus of the organization. District C saw that as creating a structured process to make those engaged in the work successful, and District A noted that,

*I know teachers hate being out of their classrooms, but meeting as part of their professional workday conveys that this is part of the job – it promotes a climate of professional growth and meeting the needs of students in their classrooms.*

Three of the four districts also made note that this level of collaboration is an evolving process, with the fourth district noting that they weren’t ready for this yet.

District D described the difference one year over another as,

*Last year it was a real struggle for my SLT team. We’re all type A personalities and poor Norm took the brunt of it from us. ‘What do you mean we’re supposed to decide?’ And now, well, now we feel comfortable. We love it. We're on the right path. We just needed some time to figure it out. I think we all just wanted to make sure we're doing it right. The irony is, there is no ‘right’!*

**Theme 1a: Leading from the middle.** A key aspect of this part of the Coherence Framework is a term “leading from the middle”, as explained in chapter II of this
research study. In the data collected, three of the four districts discussed this in depth, with 23 references gained from 3 sources. The fourth district acknowledged the concept, while not developing it (1 reference from 1 source).

District B discussed the impact of this concept on systems coherence, “We were a very top-down district, after learning more about giving voice to “the middle” so that others have ownership in decisions and a voice, we began looking at our systems through a different lens.” In addition, District C describes how attending to leadership from the middle sparked the recognition that principals were not collaborating in support of one-another, adding to the variability across sites:

*One of the things that we have worked on is leading from the middle and at the district level the middle would be our schools’ principals. So three years ago we decided to restructure our principal meetings, going from talking ‘at’ them, to setting up conversations around best practices at their sites. Now, through our work, that has evolved as we realized that they needed time to really focus on their site plans, which are in pursuit of district goals. So, in addition we have two principal collaboratives now, where we have our cohorts come together and they're also doing a parallel process to the site leadership teams. We have the principals engaging in cycles of inquiry and looking at problems of practice focusing on how they can best build the capacity at their sites as principals to achieve their goals.*

For schools, the ‘middle’ is the SLT; teacher-leaders collectively creating site based goals and outcomes, aligned with the district goals, to guide the school, and their peers. All four districts discussed that the SLT as a primary structure in their system.
They went on to describe how the SLT, in many cases, morphed from a prior structure that was in place before. District D, explained, “Each had a different system at their school site. And we took that and morphed into this more universal school leadership team where this group of educators is making decisions.” A teacher in District D related, “Prior to this, …we just helped with schedules and other management issues. Now we work together to guide the school. This is a big change.” District C’s teachers concurred, “We were empowered to look at data and make decisions for the whole school. We decided what to focus on, and how we were going to present it to our team of teachers at each grade level.”

Further, all districts explained that the change in structure, with its expectation of focused leadership, continues to take time to evolve. District C noting, “We have teams that seem to be focused and work with intentionality and yet you'll have other teams that are still learning and they're emerging in that collaborative process.” District D added, “I (principal) have to remind them, I don't lead the team and I'm really clear with my team all the time. I'm just another member. So, don't keep looking at me like ‘what's next’, because we're all in this together.

**Theme 3: Communication between sites and district.** Communication in this context was seen in the systemic way structures supported sharing information and needs around a central purpose – site supported, district goals. The data obtained from interviews centered on a ‘communication pathway’ around supporting sites in reaching their goals. The following quotes illustrate districts’ intent to hear and understand the needs of teachers and students in their districts:
• (Teacher) As the SLT, we go back to our grade level and have those conversations to get buy in. So, it’s not just the SLT team making all the choices, it's the teachers at each grade level going back and saying this is what we've talked about so far. What's your input into it? And then the SLT takes it to the cohorts and we have discussions there too, which is really nice thing about the cohorts- other schools who are focused on the same thing and we learn and build on what they have to say.

• (Principal) The principal cohorts have allowed conversations that did not occur in the past. They are targeted in their focus on their sites – they know what the issues and needs are due to their SLT – but they work collaboratively to come up with solutions amongst each other and with the district.

• (District Administrator) With a large district, its nice to know we have structures now to identify and know, ‘Okay, what kind of resources or supports can we provide to help them (SLTs) along.

Theme 7: Barriers encountered. Most of the identified barriers were focused on the time needed to sustain new practices, which influence a change in mindset. Time to create and sustain a collaborative culture appeared 7 out of the total 16 references. Also re-occurring was the idea of needing to stay focused and not let other things interrupt. The following quotes illustrate these findings:

• (Teacher) We’re at the point of our implementation where we're getting results back in Illuminate (data). Right now, we just need some time to process that.
• (Principal) A barrier is providing enough opportunities and space for collaboration and making sure that that we maintain that focus on our priorities.

• (Principal) We're still on the, ‘Is this a fad?’ We've got to stay the course. And so as principals it's our job in staff meetings to stay focused. It can't be ‘Hey I saw this really cool new thing’.

• (District Administrator) The SLT can get side tracked without the right people. If they aren’t able to communicate or feel comfortable taking that back to their teams and stepping into leadership roles, it doesn’t happen. I think as we continue to refine that role, we'll get better at leading from the middle.

Theme 8: Successes that mark progress. Most successes mentioned by all four districts were in of Creating Collaborative Cultures; 12 out of the 16 references were in this area. While there were a variety of successes shared, most centered on site leadership teams embracing the concept of focused leadership and celebrating the capacity building aspects of the system. The following quotes illustrate successes in these areas:

• (Teacher) It’s been neat to see that I can talk with a sixth grade peer about what I'm doing my classroom (as a first grade teacher) and we can talk about reaching the same goals.

• (Teacher) It's really brought us all together (the SLT) to a better understanding of how this all ties together. So now you can actually start talking about understanding concepts such leading from the middle that
everyone understands. When we first started meeting with the SLT and bringing it back to our teams, I don't think teachers knew where we were going. But over time we’re all very clear what we’re doing and why.

- (Principal) I wasn’t sure about our site focus – if it would be something everyone could tie into. But, they chose the area where they were ready and that's the important part and they're leading it. That's really a first success

- (District Administrator) Celebrating success along the way has supported and validated the process for others. Also, site walk-throughs have elicited evidence of engaging practices, and data talks, which were rarely observed in previous years. Furthermore, leadership teams have become proactive in leading and supporting student learning and institutionalizing best practices across their schools. This just wasn't happening before.

Deepening Learning

This component of the Coherence Framework describes how learning organizations engage in continuous progress of learning for both professionals and students through developing precision in pedagogy (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Deepening Learning is about teams becoming communities of practice as defined in chapter II (Senge, 1990, Wenger, 1998 & 2015). They use inquiry to examine instructional practices and their impact on student learning. Elements include, building capacity through developing a common language, identifying both proven practices and innovation to accelerate learning, and examining clear causal links to impact. In this way, the professional knowledge and skills of teachers are developed.
A few themes emerged tied to this area, with the exception of the innovation aspect. There were no references to innovation of practices amongst the districts interviewed, as most districts noted that they were just beginning work in this element of the framework. Of the emerging themes aligned with Deepening Learning, theme 4, Building Internal Capacity is most prevalent, with 24 references from 7 sources.

**Theme 1: Changing the culture or mindset.** In this context, establishing a growth mindset is linked to building capacity for the work of continuous improvement inquiry cycles. Two of the four districts indicated a focus in this area with 4 references from 2 sources. District D described this as a focus on developing the capacity of all administrators, coaches and teacher leaders through practice with inquiry and development of growth mindset. District C described a process of district and site walk-throughs, “The site presents their specific goals as they relate to the district goals, and following visits to classrooms, we debrief, brainstorming ways to increase student learning as a way to promote ‘teamness’ and growth mindset.”

**Theme 5: Building internal capacity.** This theme is most closely aligned with the Deepening Learning component; amongst the various elements that describe Deepening Learning, capacity building was the most often cited as districts described their progress in learning about continuous improvement, with 24 references. Notable, two of the four districts indicated that they were, “not really focused here, yet,” while the remaining two districts had twenty of the 24 references about building the capacities of teams through pedagogy in relation to use in cycles of inquiry.

District D noted that this component is positively impacted by their narrow focus, “with such a narrow focus, the group really is improving the group.” District C also is
beginning to see evidence of this, “Teachers are really beginning to own the work. They appreciate time to discuss with grade levels at their site, and as far as improvement, I think teachers are absolutely seeing evidence of their instructional practices impacting student learning.”

Both districts also note that they are beginning to systematize looking at student learning outcomes through either a student work analysis using rubrics and/or using learning rounds. District D noted, “They are unwrapping problems of practice and designing common lessons with the intent to measure effectiveness through student work samples or learning rounds.”

**Theme 6: Change Leadership.** This theme intersects with Deepening Learning in the intentional change leadership competency of “focusing on the team over the individual”. This leadership development in others was seen in 10 references across all four districts.

That all four districts had references to this is an interesting finding, as two of the four districts noted that they are not focused on Deepening Learning at this point. Instead they are at the point of focusing on the structure and process of inquiry with an emphasis on developing growth mindset and sense of urgency. This was summed up in District A’s statement,

*We’ve been getting the data together for sites so they can use it in an inquiry process. They present to their staff, and staff will look at it and come up with key patterns. Right now we’ve really only done this at the district level, twice a year. Principals share the findings with us (district office) so we know how to support them.*
District C and District D are both focused on developing inquiry at the district, principal and site levels. District C summed up their position succinctly:

*We really see our next steps are to work with schools in the area of deepening their learning. This whole process will always be a work in progress because we are always growing, changing. We do believe we are building capacity and the greatest compliment will be when we hear ‘this is just the way we do things’.*

**Securing Accountability**

The fourth component of the Coherence Framework focuses on internal accountability as a lead measure of progress toward collective goals (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). The conditions for internal accountability include having specific, measurable goals, transparency of practice, non-judgmental attitude about achievement, and a commitment to assessing impact and acting on the information. With 24 references spanning 7 sources, this is not a major theme, but it is widespread, as all four districts were evenly distributed in references. Themes 4 and 6 map onto this part of the framework as described below.

**Theme 4: Using data to make decisions.**

All four districts referenced the use of data to make instructional decisions in an inquiry model, though they are at different stages in its use for continuous improvement. All four districts noted that internal accountability and inquiry should be apart of district as well as site based work and are working towards transparency of practice. District A saw this as,

*A need to look at the data we have and do a little deeper analysis. That led to really evaluating, What is it telling us?, What will we do with it? If we look at it,*
sites look at it, we can see if we all see the same things. The idea is to elicit support to refine practices. We’re not quite there yet.

Others noted that at the site level, understanding what measurements to use as evidence of learning is stretching teachers and administrators. Added are quotes that show the variability of progress in this area:

- **(Teacher)** We can all say what we’re seeing and what our kids are doing is awesome but it’s hard to find the consistent data or how to design something that is measurable.
- **(Teacher)** I think this goes back to lead metrics. Which will you use? What does it actually tell you? We’d like to say they’re predictable…but I don’t know.
- **(Principal)** During faculty and department meetings, we review benchmark data. In between, we look at student writing samples. We’ve come up with rubrics related to standards, so we use these. Teams are to report at the faculty meetings, across disciplines, looking for strengths and challenges. It’s spurred a lot of really good conversations.
- **(Assistant Superintendent)** This is this is going to be a three to five year process of getting all of our schools on board with this. This system of inquiry and going through the cycles of looking at the work at their sites, designing instructional lessons and then reviewing evidence of the learning changes to improve as a continuous improvement.
Leadership

Leading for coherence is implicit in the Framework, as it functions as a foundation that the other pieces are set on top. The role of leadership as it pertains to the Coherence Framework is to internalize the culture and work of continuous improvement in the minds of those they lead (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). In addition, the elements of creating a sense of urgency in relation to results, modeling as a lead learner and the promoting the idea of coherence fit here. Response from districts were found in all four districts, but at a reduced level compared to other themes; 12 references were directly related to change leadership from 5 sources.

Theme 6: Change leadership. Change leadership practices centered around internalizing the continuous improvement process and promoting a coherent focus on a few goals were a focus, as described by District C:

And that work really has to start from leadership at the middle. Again that middle has to start with the site principals and teachers and so the capacity building for the understanding of what we're trying to do as a school district is critical. So, we want to make sure that we provide people the time to learn, experiment and collaborate and have that time to experience this change while at the same time maintain that sense of urgency.

In order to do this, three of the four districts noted that strategic timing is needed to allow culture to shift. The largest of the districts described this as an intentional plan to start with volunteers, and year-by-year add schools:

It began with 10 of our schools working in facilitated collaboration. They began to do work at their school site with their leadership team. They worked for a year...
going deep in the learning areas that they felt was important; unwrapping that as a collective team and going through a cycle of inquiry. This year in our second year of implementation we're up to 19 schools doing this work. This isn't something that happens overnight. We plan that within five years this is the system that’s in place, completely focused on learning.

Even smaller districts, while describing processes that put structures in place throughout their district, described the need to be intentional about the process. In the words of District D, “So it's taken time, but the first year we put in place most of the structures we thought would support our coherent focus, and as capacity built up so did understanding.” District B needed to step back even further, “We decided we needed to do this in phases. We looked to see if we had the right people in the right places. To begin, we just needed people to start talking to each other.” District A acted similarly, “The first year, we started with just administrators.”

Theme 7: Barriers encountered along the way. Another essential point that emerged was the fact that groups of people don’t all move at the same speed, or in the same direction. Districts noted this not so much as a barrier to overcome, but as a challenge:

- **(Principal)** In the junior high we have departments and within each department, everyone has to understand the ‘why’. Everybody is at least talking about our focus, and is kind of committed, but that will vary from department to department. As a district, we have to stay committed.

- **(Assistant Superintendent)** One (challenge) in particular is the fact that we are a large district. And to move everyone, all the schools together, in this the
journey of coherence will take time and so we have to figure out a way to balance the sense of urgency along with patience. In addition, even the schools participating – have pockets of excellence.

Theme 8: Successes that mark progress. Despite some of the challenges, successes were also referenced in the area of change leadership, primarily in the area of setting a context for continuous improvement and beginning to shape culture:

- (Teacher) Our leadership team is empowered through this process. We have a vision we never had before. We want to look at data and analyze how we’re going to do this, and how we’re going to present it to our team, or grade level.

- (Principal) This has been some of the most rewarding work that I’ve done in my career. To be part of a team of strong teacher-leaders using a common language, doing some great instructional design work and best of all looking at evidence of learning.

- (Assistant Superintendent) I think we have success in that we have the process in place and people are becoming more comfortable to it. I think the very first time, even first year, it was really hard - people did it but it was it was very awkward just because they didn’t know what to expect. Why we were doing it. We are all ‘learning through doing’.

- (Superintendent) We have made really good progress in two-three years; you walk onto any campus in this district and you’ll see a passionate commitment to teaching and learning. That passionate commitment is what makes what we’re doing truly successful. It’s really helped us accelerate. I think we’ve done remarkable things for two years.
Final Thoughts

At the conclusion of each interview session, participant districts were asked if they had anything else they would like to add regarding their journey toward coherent systems. Following are their closing words:

**District A:** (Assistant Superintendent) *We had a push to make sure all departments are represented at the secondary sites, and grades at the elementary. I think that's been very good. We have teachers who embrace the process of being a teacher-leader. Not everyone yet, but we’re getting there. Really the work only happens if the teachers own it and are leading that effort.*

**District B:** (Superintendent) *Again, relational capacity is key, trust and transparency between stakeholders. This will develop the collective efficacy we need. We are challenging every area of the district to reflect, change and come together for a common purpose – our students.*

**District C:** (Assistant Superintendent) *If we are to be truly focused, everyone has to know what it is and work towards it. So, your leader of facilities can speak to coherence and our focus. Our CBO can speak to coherence. And so we wanted to make sure that we all understood this process and the direction that we were focused on because each division in our district, ultimately, is here to make sure all of our students are learning and they are ready for college career and life.*

**District D:** (Superintendent) *You know, you can go to most of our schools, talk to most teachers, certainly administrators, and ask what we're focusing on and hear a consistent answer in depth. That’s coherence across the organization.*
Summary

Chapter IV provided a review of the purpose statement, research questions and methodology of this research paper. The emerged themes from semi-structured interviews and analysis of artifacts of the four participant district teams was explored, analyzed and coordinated to the theoretical framework guiding the research. Eight themes emerged and were mapped to the five elements of the Coherence Framework. Two of themes were significant, that of creating a narrow focus and changing culture or mindset, which correspond Focusing Direction and Creating Collaborative Cultures.

Overall, the findings present a picture of how participant districts in the Systems Leadership Collaborative created and implemented coherent systems of continuous improvement, including the successes and barriers each encountered. Chapter V offers conclusions, implications and recommendations based on the findings of this research.
Chapter V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The result of all of this work is emerging as The California Way, which builds on a collaborative team approach to positive education change. (Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0, 2015, p. 2)

Momentum of an economy based on knowledge, data and expertise, and away from a manufacturing-based economy, is having a profound impact on the expectations of our nation’s schools. A transformation, not just in content, but also in the ways students are educated has come to the forefront of nearly every discussion on the future state of U.S. schools. The premise of a 21st century student is one prepared with the critical thinking, innovation skills, global awareness and technology skills to be adaptable in a world that in continually reinventing itself (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Educators and school system leaders are questioning past practices and exploring new structures of teaching and learning, while considering how best to ensure that learning experiences are responsive to a wide variety of students’ needs.

Chapter V synthesizes findings from this phenomenological research study, which examined the lived experiences of four districts transforming into learning organizations, incorporating systems of continuous improvement, in order to meet the needs of 21st century learners. Each district participated in the Systems Leadership Collaborative (SLC) learning network. The research methods and data collection procedures are explained and findings, conclusions, and recommendations based on the data are presented.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of districts that participated in the SLC, and created and implemented district systems of continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning, and Securing Accountability. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe the successes and barriers districts encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement.

Central Research Question

This phenomenological study was guided by the following Research Question:

*How do district teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences in terms of creating coherent systems of continuous improvement, implementing systems of continuous improvement, successes achieved, and barriers encountered?*

Research Sub-Questions

1. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of creating systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

2. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences of implementing systems of coherence for continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative
Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?

3. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the success they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?

4. How do district implementation teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe the barriers they encountered on their journey toward continuous improvement?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative, phenomenological method was used to explore the lived experiences of districts that endeavored to transform their systems and practices into learning organizations during their two-year participation in the SLC learning network. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with multiple members of each district team to examine the depth and nuances of implementation as perceived at both the district and site levels. Interviews were transcribed and verified by participants, then uploaded into NVivo 11 software to assist with identifying themes and patterns that emerged across districts. The five elements of the coherence framework were used as a guide for coding to ascertain if districts used these as organizing principles in their journey. As transcripts were analyzed line-by-line, themes emerged and were coded.

The Coherence Framework was used as a theoretical guide and lens through which creation and implementation of systems of continuous improvement was studied. The Systems Leadership Collaborative had used this framework with districts designing transformation and it was therefore considered an appropriate lens to view implementation. The framework also shaped the interview questions as the primary
inquiry method (See Appendix C). In addition, districts’ implementation plans were collected as artifacts, analyzed and coded. The use of interviews from multiple points of view and artifacts allowed for triangulation of data.

Population

The population of this study was the 1025 public school districts in the state of California striving to achieve systems of continuous improvement as described in the *California Blueprint for Great Schools 2.0*. For this study, districts that had implementation teams that participated in the SLC learning network were the target population. The SLC consisted of districts from both Northern and Southern California that met three times per year during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years for the purpose of transforming their districts into learning organizations focused on cycles of continuous improvement.

Sample

To conduct a phenomenological study, a sample of the target population was selected using purposive sampling that included the following criteria to ensures that participants had common experiences regarding the phenomenon studied:

1. Districts with implementation teams that participated in the SLC.
2. Implementation planning teams that participated in the SLC for the full two years.
3. Implementation planning team that consisted of both central office and site levels members.
4. Districts that constructed implementation plans for systems of continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework.
Using these criteria, seven district teams were identified, each comprised of six to eight members. In order to conduct in-depth interviews, there was a need to reduce the sample size further. Convenience sampling was used to select four districts as the sample for this study. Each district implementation team interviewed consisted of four to seven members, for a total of 28 participants, representing teachers, site administrators, district administrators and superintendents.

**Major Findings**

While each district interviewed was unique in the path they designed and the progress they had made to date, the analysis of patterns in the data illuminated similar themes among them. The data collected from the four participant districts generated key insights into creating systems of continuous improvement using the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability. The major findings described in this section summarize the discoveries made following data collection, using the Coherence Framework as a theoretical lens to view the findings. Following this summary, conclusions are presented that answer the questions of this research study regarding creating and implementing systems of continuous improvement, including successes and barriers.

**Focusing Direction**

From the data, setting a narrow focus on 2-3 district-wide goals as a starting point emerged as a key theme in systems planning for all districts. All districts spoke of simplifying the complexity of modern education and creating a focus that all stakeholders, at all levels, could support and work towards. In addition, all districts noted that communication channels were the most important part of this element, both as points
of success in creating clarity and as a measure of continued tension. Districts noted that consistency with this element was absolutely necessary to begin changing mindset and build systems of coherence across and between schools. One participant summed up the goal of coherence, “You can go to most our schools, talk to most teachers, certainly administrators, and ask what we're focusing on and hear a consistent answer in depth. That’s coherence across the site.”

In addition to creating a clear focus, creating systems to support the focus of the organization was a priority. All four districts, regardless of size, described the need to create smaller groups, made up of both district level and site level personnel in order to facilitate deep conversations that flowed from the district office to sites and back again.

**Creating a Collaborative Culture**

Analysis of data showed that an emphasis on Creating Collaborative Cultures is an area of primary focus for district teams at all levels. A variety of change leadership techniques were described that focused on building the capacity of every member of the organization through “learning by doing”. Districts used the system they designed as a key lever for change, focusing on student learning, effective practices and cycles of inquiry. The importance of developing a non-judgmental mindset focused on continual growth and transparency was prevalent in the data as illustrated by the following quote: “The work we engage in needs to value all involved. By doing this, those in leadership roles become ‘lead learners’ alongside their staff. In turn, a growth mindset set on continuous improvement develops.”

Districts described creating overlapping teams, those at the district level with teacher and site administration input, and site leadership teams with district support.
Also notable, most districts found that there were district-specific and site-specific collaboration teams already in place that could be re-purposed; however, principal collaboration for the purpose of focused inquiry was a missing, yet necessary structure. Districts reported the most instances of success within this element, noting that site leadership teams have embraced the concept of focused leadership and celebrating the capacity building aspects of the system.

**Deepening Learning**

The data showed that Deepening Learning was the most underdeveloped of the four components of the Coherence Framework. Work in this component was evident through a focus on developing the capacity of teams around pedagogy and development of a growth mindset. Only two districts indicated beginning to systematize looking at student learning outcomes through either a student work analysis using rubrics and/or using learning rounds: “We really see our next steps are to work with schools to deepen their learning.”

**Securing Accountability**

All four districts noted that internal accountability and inquiry is a necessary part of both district as well as site-based work. This included developing collective efficacy in the use of data. Evidence indicated all four districts understand the need to use data to make instructional decisions, though they are at different stages in its use for continuous improvement. All districts are in the beginning phases, with only two using this process with consistency at the teacher team level. Also notable was an inconsistent understanding of which data to use and how to interpret it to affect classroom practice:
“If we look at it (data), sites look at it, we can see if we all see the same things. Right now, people still see it as, well not a ‘gotcha’ but maybe a show. The idea is to elicit support to refine practices. We’re not quite there yet.”

**Leadership**

The Coherence Framework concept of “leading from the middle” was prevalent in the data, with each district using this term to describe a targeted shift in culture within their districts. There was evidence supporting an intentional shift to a shared leadership model, where decision-making is in the hands of those doing the work, aligned to the overall organizational focus: “And that work really has to start from leadership at the middle. Again, that middle has to start with the site principals and teachers and so the capacity building for the understanding of what we're trying to do as a school district is critical.”

In order to do this, three of the four districts noted that strategic timing is needed to allow culture to shift. Districts described the need to be intentional about the process, using a push/pull leadership style (Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

**Summary of Findings**

Using the Coherence Framework as a lens for development, the researcher identified six major findings that impact the research questions:

1. Although using same framework, each district created systems that met their unique needs.

2. Developing a focus aligned to 2-3 actionable goals was a first priority in creating a coherent system.
3. Clear communication across a district – central office to sites, and between sites – was a concern and priority of all, and was not dependent on size of the district.

4. Districts that had more successes also had more intentional leadership from the executive cabinet.

5. Consistency is what begins to change mindset.

6. Districts acknowledged, and communicated to all stakeholders, that transformation is a multi-year process that will never truly be “done”.

**Unexpected Findings**

An unexpected finding was how closely aligned each district was to the Coherence Framework, yet each had also clearly forged their own path by creating unique structures, timelines and outcomes that fit their district. Although the Coherence Framework was used by the SLC, it was thought that there would only be cursory use or reference to it. It was unexpected to find the terminology used in a knowledgeable way to describe current work and future vision for growth, including the areas that districts had not yet really begun work.

**Conclusions**

Based on the major finding across districts, and connected to the literature on second order change, six conclusions were drawn that answer the research question that began this study. The research question central to this study was, *How do district teams that participated in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative describe their experiences in terms of creating and implementing systems of continuous improvement,*
successes achieved, and barriers encountered? This question is broken into its sub-parts below in order to explore conclusions based on the findings of this research.

**RQ 1: How do district teams that participated in the SLC describe their experiences in terms of creating systems of continuous improvement?**

**Conclusion 1: Creating a clear set of actionable goals brings focus to the entire organization.** This was a major theme that emerged; with all districts noting that a “laser-like” focus was key to beginning and sustaining their journey. Different than creating a vision, it is described as a first strategic step. The key aspect described district leaders who did not paint broad pictures of a future state, but rather used data to assess their current reality, compared that to the desired state, and then devised 2-3 actionable goals that reached across the organization. The idea of a few clearly articulated, impactful goals was supported in the literature, noting that as everyone becomes increasingly clear on the goals of the organization, coherence is built through creating common purpose, common language and reduction in organizational fragmentation (Byrk et al., 2015; Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Kay & Greenhill, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Another aspect of beginning the work of transformation and focus that emerged across districts, was the support the structure of the SLC itself provided. Although working within a network was not directly explored in this research, a conclusion was made based on participant responses and the literature, that the process of developing systems and transformation is accelerated by participation in a networked group that is convened over time expressly for that purpose (Byrk et al., 2015; Chrispeels, 2006; Fullan, 2010; Honig et al., 2010).
Conclusion 2: Change leadership requires systems thinking, consistent focus, and participation as a learner. The findings across several themes led to the conclusion that setting goals and strategies are not enough. Leadership that remains cohesive, consistent and focused is needed, including intentional efforts to eliminate distractions and competing programs (Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2002; Byrk, Gomez & Gunrow, 2010). Beginning the process of coherence requires leadership at all levels to be uncomfortable; coherence is developed over time, and therefore, quality ideas are refined as more of the organization takes ownership and continues to define the focus (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Senge (1990, 2012) described the complex nature of school systems as dynamic, changing as those within the culture begin to change the culture, including leaders, who participate alongside those they lead, learning, growing and shifting practices as needed.

In addition, all the leaders interviewed spoke of the goal of coherence as a deep understanding of the work of the organization, requiring a consistent, focused message. To consistently communicate their focus, districts developed an explicit conduit, leading to the conclusion that districts require teams of stakeholders across the organization that work as a system to create collective understanding, as well as communicate the importance and priority of the organizational focus.

RQ 2: How do district teams that participated in the SLC describe their experiences in terms of implementing systems of continuous improvement?

Conclusion 3: Synergy is created through district and site-based collaboration focused on learning. Multiple studies, both in systems research and in effective schools research highlight collaboration as a way to change culture, establish
focus, create common language and improve the organization (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Fullen & Quinn, 2015; Senge et al., 2012; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). The synergy of collaboration was exemplified in the study as districts described the strategic overlapping of collaborative structures: a district level team that included site administrators and teacher leaders as members; principal collaboratives that share across sites with district support; site-based leadership teams that represent the teacher teams of the school, and include district membership; and teacher teams that worked primarily within and occasionally across grade-levels or departments. The system is dynamic, using inquiry to better understand the learning needs of students with a focus on decreasing variability of teaching and learning through the active sharing of ideas and input to effect common purpose, with a deliberate focus on the learning of the group. The organization learns together through growing explicitness (due to the focus) of doing the work (Fullan, 2010). Figure 5 demonstrates a model of how various teams throughout the school organization work synergistically to improve student outcomes.

Figure 5. Model of Synergistic Collaboration. The model shows the relationship of various teams in the system, their relationship to student outcomes and the flow of communication.
Conclusion 4: Consistent, relentless focus builds trust, changes mindset and develops culture. Organizational change recognizes that trust, a growth mindset and a collective culture of achievement are necessary components of reform. Further, the literature notes that a district’s capacity for reform hinged on the interaction of human and social capital, through relational trust (Lasky, 2004; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). An overwhelming convergence of interview data centered on building trust within and across teams. This was noted in descriptions of leaders’ ability to “stay the course”, in teachers’ descriptions of being asked to make decisions that were meaningful and valued, and in the ability of the system to make a meaningful difference in student outcomes. This finding wasn’t unusual. Byrk (2010) found in his longitudinal research in Chicago’s public schools that some of the most powerful data was in the area of relational trust and systems change, with the inverse true as well; schools with low trust had weak outcomes.

The data led to the conclusion that trust, along with a changed mindset, were directly influenced by the district and site’s unwavering adherence to established goals over time, and development of shared leadership practices that allowed sites to create their own goals in alignment to the district, and further, teachers to see their actions directly advancing those goals. With these actions, an ethos of trust and understanding begins to develop, which shifts the culture.

RQ 3: How do district teams that participated in the SLC describe the barriers they encountered?

Conclusion 5: Time and space to develop and learn together are necessary to communicate the priority of the change. Reoccurring throughout the data was a theme
of time; recognizing that changing culture and practice occur over years not months. In addition, there was recognition that finding time for collaborative inquiry in already crowded workdays was often difficult. Data reflected this, as a barrier in several themes, leading to the conclusion that consideration as to the time collaboration takes must be given a priority.

Crowded workdays leave collaboration sessions feeling like “one more thing” to do, rather than the key to improvement systems. Changes in mindset and practice only occur with consistent repetition of the new paradigm over time. Since collaboration is the primary vehicle of change, it is a structure that should not be left to chance. Hattie (2015) underscores this need, explaining that people “need space to explore ideas, make and learn from errors” (p.27). He also warns that educators often aren’t collaborating with purpose as much as “cooperating” to find consensus. Hattie goes on to note that when time and expectations are provided and communicated, value is attributed to the process.

RQ 4: How do district teams that participated in the SLC describe their successes?

Conclusion 6: Celebration of success along the way is necessary to maintain momentum. Success ran as a thread across several themes, yet during data collection, many respondents related not having focused on success as an elements until asked about it during the interview. Change efforts take time. In addition, the process can be messy for those engaged in it, making it hard to notice improvements along the way.

One of the hardest mental hurdles to comprehend in a continuous improvement framework is that it is an on-going process, and therefore never finished. Therefore, taking time to reflect on change itself, and note the successes along the way supports and
validates the process for others (Fullen, 2011). The literature speaks of leaders using success as a motivator in two ways. First, by drawing attention to specific areas shows growth even while immersed in the hard work (Elmore, 2014; DuFour & Eaker, 2004). The second is in building the self-efficacy of teams to recognize success and celebrate the milestones even as they continue to move forward (Ackerson-Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Byrk, 2015).

**Implications for Action**

This phenomenological research study gave voice to the lived experiences of four school districts in California as they began and implemented systems of continuous improvement. The data collected from each was analyzed and the synthesis of results provided conclusions and implications for action. This study serves as a model to support other school districts desiring to transform into learning organizations. While it is not exactly a road map, it provides mile-markers along the way to guide change. The following implications for actions are a result of the collective findings and conclusions supported by the data.

**Implication for action 1: To prepare for transforming into a learning organization; create foundations for success**

Planning for change is not the same as planning for implementation (Ackerson-Anderson & Anderson, 2010). Before jumping into implementation, districts must create foundations for success in order to sustain the inevitable push back and confusions that will occur. Several conditions must be in place to support an effective change process:
1. Executive leadership must be part of the change. If those at the highest levels don’t see a need for change, or have their own agenda for change models, there will be constant confusion and conflict.

2. A systems-change team should be convened, comprised of stakeholders at every level of the district; cabinet, district office, site administration and teacher leaders. In this way, it is not top-down or bottom-up leadership, rather it is together (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This team needs strong individuals that work collectively, that can deliver a cohesive message.

3. Teams begin by asking two key questions, 1) what do we need our graduates to know and be able to do? and, 2) what is our current reality based on data?

   In essence, the team begins to plan build a foundation for change by exploring their reasons for a shared vision. When more people are involved in the process of creating the shared vision, they are more likely to champion it and work to achieve it (Ackerson-Anderson & Anderson, 2010)

**Implication for action 2: To begin transformation to a learning organization, create organizational focus with 2-3 clearly articulated goals based on a ‘moral purpose’**

   To begin, districts need to be crystal clear about their “deep, relentless moral purpose” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). A moral purpose drives the selection of two to three specific goals and how they will be measured. The selection of only two to three is purposeful; the goal is that every person in the organization and community can articulate the focus exactly. The strategies used to pursue them will further define the goals for all stakeholders. At a district level, they may sound broad, allowing each department, and
every school of the district, to further define their part in reaching the goals. Utilizing a loose-tight principle (Marzano & Waters, 2009), the focus stays tight, while allowing for flexibility in implementation based on students’ need.

**Implication for action 3: To sustain implementation; consider the structures and flexible conditions needed to support communication**

Change leadership requires looking at the existing structures and process with a critical eye; do they support reaching the defined goals? If the defined goals are not the purpose or priority of this group or meeting, consider if it is absolutely necessary. The priority should guide purposeful reorganization. Where time is spent communicates priorities. Explicitly designed systems to create transparent communication pathways are key. The following considerations need to be taken:

- The model is a user-centered and problem-centered approach to improving teaching and learning, which accelerates through learning-by-doing. (Carnegie Foundation, 2017). Therefore, while the focus leads, it is the process of improving that is the heart of the model, with overlapping teams collaborating using inquiry.

- Develop instructional leadership at all levels through building the capacity of all members to use student data to set goals, implement and evaluate processes and outcomes and develop needed expertise.

- Hattie (2015) recognized that creating time and space for teams is as far as many districts have gone in structuring, and that it is not sufficient to result in gains for teaching and learning. He emphasizes that groups need to focus on “the evidence of impact, common understandings of what impact means” (p. 18).
Implication for action 4: Affect lasting change by creating ownership of both the problem and the solution

A practice considered imperative to moving forward and motivating those within the system, is that of shared leadership. Creating systems of shared leadership build the capacity of all members of a learning organization to set goals, implement and evaluate processes and outcomes, and develop expertise around an issue. Through this process, instructional leadership at all levels develops.

In this framework, the element is named ‘leading from the middle’. It constitutes empowering teams to chart their own course in alignment with the district focus. Teams create their own aligned goals based on their student population and create strategies to affect change, including measuring them. All on the team, including the traditional leader, have an equal voice.

Implication for action 5: Anticipate barriers and develop relational trust

Relationships are built on trust, and it is foundational to the work across all levels of a district: district office staff, site administration, leadership teams and faculty. Research indicates that high levels of organizational trust correlate with increased effort of employees to strive toward organizational goals (Kallebberg, 2002; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2004). Trust is enhanced and personal integrity is heightened through

- Transparent, consistent, relentless and personal communication
- Allowing all personnel to see their behavior as advancing the vision through ownership of the solution
In any learning organization, there will be natural resistance due to current cultural conditions, and the only way to overcome this is through inquiry and reflection of real problems, essentially requiring those within the culture to change the culture (Senge, 1990).

Implication for action 6: Celebrate successes to maintain momentum

The challenges brought on by transformation can be paralyzing. Creating a system of recognition and celebration help everyone see the progress that is occurring. Celebrating a point in time and acknowledging the hard work, progress and change in mindset that has occurred gives validation to the efforts made, and allows leaders to reinforce the new culture (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010). In this study, most districts had not taken time to reflect on progress until recounting for these interviews, and noted that they had made a lot of progress in just the last two or three years. The literature on change leadership makes a point to include celebrating success as an important component, underscoring the motivation people feel when they are appreciated and see that their work matters (Crowley, 2011).

Recommendations for Further Research

This phenomenological study described the experiences of four districts creating and implementing systems of coherence. From this study, data illuminated themes of practices that could be of use to other districts on a similar path. Based on these findings and the limitations of this type of study, the following recommendations are made to expand the understanding of how learning organizations are developed and sustained in school districts:
1. The constraining element of all participants in this study was participation in the SLC. Next-level research is recommended that would expand understanding of the impact and guidance of the collaborative network.

2. Nearly all districts discussed the importance of developing a growth mindset in order to fully support the inquiry process. Further research into targeted development of growth mindset and relatedness to inquiry cycles should be investigated.

3. Each district had created unique structures and process using the Coherence Framework. Investigating more broadly, along with other implementation models, to discover if there is truly a pathway, or steppingstones, that all districts must take to transform into learning organizations should be researched.

4. Creating longitudinal studies with these districts to investigate correlations of the changed process to state assessments would provide further depth of understanding into their practices and potential success and validation.

5. Many of the districts spoke of creating equity in their district by “decreasing variability” across their schools, and within their schools, through building coherence. A study correlating the measure of coherence with the amount of variance within and across schools would expand our knowledge in this area.

6. The work of building coherent systems is never done: people come and go, circumstances change. A study investigating best practices for maintaining a culture of learning/improvement and recommendations for enculturation of new members is recommended.
7. This research, and a survey of the literature, suggests that certain leaders are better at mobilizing for change and encouraging an environment of trust and growth. What are the specific skill sets these leaders possess? How is leading for change different than general leadership skills? Both of these questions as research inquiry would add to the body of knowledge.

8. Districts in this study described a struggle to find the correct data to use, understand its significance related to continuous improvements and capacity of staff to use it. With this in mind, a study seeking to understand which data successful districts are using to propel themselves and how they use it would be timely.

9. In addition to above, answering the question of whether use of data is a structural element or is its use instrumental to the change process, as how to best use the state date system should be explored.

10. A study that seeking to understand if coherence is influenced by the demographics of the district would be instructive. Does high numbers of poverty, second language learning, special education students impact a district or school sites’s ability to construct, implement and maintain systems of continuous improvement for learning?

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

This research began as a personal question; why are well-intentioned, hard-working school districts unable to make the impact they intend in the lives of students? I have a passionate belief in education that drives my quest to answer this question. This research study is a part of that, though there is more to learn.
Results from the study indicated that educators are frustrated with the system, are tired and overwhelmed with the need to balance multiple initiatives, and are generally resigned that their current reality won’t substantially change. Yet, there are pockets of success. As of now, successes are usually found at the classroom or school site level, indicating that a strong, visionary leader has had an impact. How is this scaled at the district, state and national level? Knowing that California districts are being asked to transform into learning organizations, and that a district collaborative had been convened through the Association of California School Administrators, became fertile ground to see how early implementer districts grappled with these questions.

Beyond the scope of the questions of this study, I found that districts were inequitable in their development. Those districts that have created the most coherence had a few elements in their favor:

1. They require strong, committed leaders at the very top who understand learning and instruction deeply; they either led the charge or trusted enough to empower those below them and supported their leadership.

2. District leadership took it upon them to get everything else out of the way, often making hard choices to good causes in the name of focus.

3. Districts who began from a culture of general cooperation, trust and transparency made the most accelerated growth, indicating how important that foundation is. It also indicates, for districts not starting with such advantage, that explicit attention in this area needs to be part of the plan.

4. They “embrace the struggle”. Meaning, that the mindset of the leadership team was firmly rooted in growth, knowing the path will have its obstacles.
Consistency in messaging was clear. As one district put it, “They know this isn’t going away. They know we aren’t going away. It’s the way we do things now; every person hired knows – this is how we work, choose wisely”.

In the course of interviewing, the researcher was able to speak with Superintendents who reported being re-energized for leadership with this model, that it changed how they view their role and their work. They had conceptualized shared leadership and focused teaching and learning to the point that they had changed what they normally do to be involved in their schools. One even took me outside to see that they had changed the name on the district office from Central Offices to Learning Support Center. In his words, “We want the entire community – and remind ourselves – that this is what we are really all about.”

In this study, districts showed strong ownership of Focusing Direction and Creating a Collaborative Culture. These are the foundational core, of building coherent systems, but true transformation will come with deeper understanding and work in the areas of Deeper Learning and Securing Accountability. Both of these components operationalize a growth mindset, giving evidence of a new way of teaching and learning for the profession.
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## APPENDIX A

### Literature Matrix

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<th>Literature Matrix</th>
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<th>Reform in CA -ESSA -LCAP</th>
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<th>Effective Schools</th>
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<th>Shared Leadership</th>
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APPENDIX B:

Brandman University Internal Review Board Approval

[Image of an email exchange showing approval for a research application]
Thank you for taking time to come together this afternoon to share your ‘journey toward coherence’ with me. Even though each district is completely unique in their context, ongoing circumstances, etc., capturing your journey will very informative for others who are just beginning, or even in the midst, of creating their own journey.

Before we start, I’d like to let you know that we will be recording the interview. If there is anything you’d like to not have recorded, or deleted, just let me know. I can stop, or back up the recording.

(Start Recording)

Before you begin sharing your journey, let’s do some introductions. Can you tell us your name, school or dist. Office and position? Also, how long have you been with the district?

(Questions)
1. In order to understand the unique context of (school district), could you tell me a little about the background of the district?
   a. *Looking for drivers of change

2. RQ1 - How would you describe the process of creating coherent systems across (school district) with respect to Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, Deepening Learning and Securing Accountability?
   a. Describe when and how you started this journey – who was involved to begin with, how has it grown or evolved?
   b. (Possible sub-questions)
      i. What focus guides the district? Who determined the focus? How is it articulated?
      ii. How would you describe collaboration within the district? How do the different groups overlap?
      iii. How would you describe the element of ‘continuous improvement’ within the district? How are you measuring growth/progress?
   *Description of the system and how it began and is structured

3. RQ2 - Describe how you implemented systems change
   a. What led to the decision to create coherent systems?
   b. Who was involved in the beginning stages?
   c. How has the transformation grown or evolved over time?
   *Description of the processes or steps taken to implement change, who was involved in decisions, and timelines used.
4. **RQ 3** - Describe the successes or breakthroughs have you had:
   a. How have they propelled your journey?
   *Description of specific breakthroughs, their impact or how accomplished

5. **RQ4** - Describe any barriers have you faced:
   a. What was their impact?
   b. How did you overcome them?
   *Description of barriers common to school districts and steps taken to overcome
December 2017,

Dear Prospective Study Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study of school districts engaged in transforming into learning organizations focused on continuous improvement. The main investigator of this study is Kira Shearer, Doctoral Candidate in Brandman University’s Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program. You were chosen to participate in this study because of your participation in the California Systems Leadership Collaborative during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years. Participation should require approximately one hour of your time and is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw participation from the study at any time without any consequences.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to describe the journey that your district has taken to create coherent systems and transform into a learning organization, focused on continuous improvement at all levels. The study is intending to describe the successes and barriers your district has encountered and the strategies taken to celebrate successes and overcome barriers.

**PROCEDURES:** If you decide to participate in the study, you, and your implementation team, will be invited to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted by the primary investigator. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. A copy of the interview protocol is included with this letter.

**RISKS, INCONVENIENCES, AND DISCOMFORTS:** There are no known major risks to your participation in this research study. Some interview questions will ask for various points of view, which may be discomforting.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS:** There are no material benefits to you or your team for participation, but a potential may be that you will have an opportunity to share your expertise with other present or future school districts that may benefit from your knowledge and expertise. The information from this study is intended to inform researchers, policymakers, and educators of strategies for transforming school district culture to one of continuous improvement.

**ANONYMITY:** Any information that you provide for the research study, including any personal information you provide, will not be linked to you or the district in any way. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for the study. The district will be assigned a participant number. The interview session will not reference your name in document title or URL. During the recording, the researcher will not refer you by name. This will also hold true for any school or district name. Any names used by the participant during the recorded session will be redacted.
from the transcript. The interviews will be transcribed, reviewed, and maintained only by the primary investigator on a password-protected external server.

You are encouraged to ask any questions, at any time, that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. You may contact the principal researcher, Kira Shearer, by phone at (951) 443-8168 or email kshearer@mail.brandman.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about this study or your rights as a study participant, you may write or call the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, and 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

Very Respectfully,

Kira Shearer
Principal Researcher
Brandman University
APPENDIX E:

Participant Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kira Shearer M.S., a doctoral student at Brandman University.


RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Kira Shearer, M.S.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY: The purpose of this research study is to describe the journey that your district has taken to create coherent systems and transform into a learning organization, focused on continuous improvement at all levels. The study is intending to describe the successes and barriers your district has encountered and the strategies taken to celebrate successes and overcome barriers. The results of this study may assist districts in the design of effective systems for transformational change to meet the demands of 21st century learning and the current California accountability plan. This study may also provide much needed information and data to district/school leadership regarding the process that have the greatest impact on developing leadership skills across the organization.

PARTICIPATION: By participating in this study I agree to participate in an individual and/or group interview. The interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be conducted in person or by phone.

I understand that:

a. There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer and/or password protected electronic files that are available only to the researcher.

b. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All identifying information will be identifier-redacted and confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings, transcripts and notes taken by the researcher and transcripts from the interview will be destroyed after three years.
c. My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time with no consequence. I may also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time.

d. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent. All identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed I will be so informed and my consent obtained.

e. The possible benefit of this study is that your input may help add to the research regarding developing coherent systems or continuous improvement across school districts. The findings will be available to you at the conclusion of the study and will provide insights about the transformation experience in which you participated. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

f. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641.

g. If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Kira Shearer at kshearer@mail.brandman.edu, or by phone at (951)-443-8168, or Dr. Philip Pendley, (advisor) at pendley@brandman.edu.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the “Research Participant’s Bill of Rights”. I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

____________________________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party

____________________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator

____________________________________
Date
APPENDIX F

Brandman University Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.

2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.

3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.

4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.

5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.

6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.

7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.

8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.

9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.

10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.
APPENDIX G:

National Institute of Health Certification

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Kira Shearer successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/19/2016.

Certification Number: 2077221.