Chapter 1: Statement of The Problem and The Underlying Framework

There has been a continuous dialogue among various stakeholders regarding the best ways to address and close the persisting achievement gap in the United States. Some of this dialogue has led to the development of legislation and educational policy. Starting with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and its subsequent reauthorizations – No Child Left Behind (2001) and, most recently, Race to the Top (2010) – policy makers have sought to establish accountability mechanisms that focus on improving academic quality and student achievement. Yet, these newest approaches with NCLB (2001) and Race to the Top (2010) focus on the classroom level rather than the context within which these classrooms reside or the leadership necessary to create real change in either academic quality or student achievement.

Leadership is integral towards achieving organizational improvement (Northouse, 2007; Sternberg, 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Ruff & Shoho, 2005; Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Several authors have conducted research in areas investigating the psychological aspects of leadership such as leader creativity, mental models, and leader self-efficacy and how these elements influence leadership practice (Sternberg, 2007; Ruff & Shoho; Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Others have focused their research on investigating the behavioral aspects of leadership surrounding the ways a leader builds organizational relationships and promotes a culture of inquiry or reflection (Hallinger, 2003; Northouse, 2007). This study examined the extent to which a principal’s leadership practice leads to the possibility of instructional improvement. This study also examined the ways in which the interpersonal and psychological attributes of a leader influence the choices and practices that lead to or constrain the possibility of organizational improvement.
Background of the Problem

Educational reform is not a new idea. Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) suggest that since the 1990’s to the present, American education has experienced a period in reform surrounding standardization and marketing. They also assert that this most recent wave of educational reform has been the result of a loss of faith by the general public surrounding the lack of schools’ ability to increase students’ academic performance and close the achievement gap (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). The authors attribute this loss of faith to the surplus of information that has become increasingly available over the past decade. In a world that has seen an increase in the accessibility of information through technological advances, especially within the past decade, our world has become more integrated socially (ibid.). The release of data surrounding achievement losses or gains reported by schools and made available to the public has added to the debate on what stakeholders are doing to improve gaps in academic performance (ibid.). Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) argue that the public’s loss of faith in our schools have led to accepted beliefs surrounding the need for increasing levels of school accountability, establishing performance targets, developing and implementing high-stakes testing, and implementing intervention (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). These accepted beliefs by stakeholders highlighted by Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) lie at the heart of our most recent reform efforts in education and educational policy in the advent of No Child Left Behind (2001).

Accountability Mechanisms and No Child Left Behind (2001)

The accountability mechanisms outlined in No Child Left Behind (2001) have held schools, school districts, and states to a higher standard than what existed prior to
the enactment of this law. The law requires states to: 1) adopt standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college, the workplace, and the global economy; 2) build and manage data systems that measure student growth and inform teachers and school leaders about instructional progress; 3) recruit, reward, retain, and develop effective teachers and school leaders, particularly in high need areas; and 4) turn around the lowest-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). These are the core requirements geared at establishing external and internal accountability measures for states, districts, and schools.

No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB, 2001) blueprint for strengthening schools suggest that schools will meet these requirements by: 1) providing more rigorous coursework, 2) hiring science and math professionals to serve as adjunct teachers, 3) using empirically proven methods of instruction, and 4) continuing to hold schools accountable for results (United States Department of Education, 2002). NCLB (2001) also places a large emphasis on the recruiting and hiring highly qualified teachers. However, NCLB (2001) delves little into discussion about what constitutes high-quality instruction. Furthermore, the NCLB (2001) blueprint mentions training teachers in empirically based instructional methods, but fails to fully define what this actually means.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) point to the ambiguity of improving teacher learning and training as they describe Title II of NCLB (2001), otherwise known as the Improving Teacher Quality Program, where it states that state funds received through NCLB (2001) may be utilized to ensure teachers obtain the necessary training to possess the subject-matter knowledge and instructional skills needed to teach their academic subjects. Furthermore, funds can be used to support principals in developing their
instructional leadership skills in order to help teachers teach and students learn (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006).

In the section of Title II that discusses improving teacher quality, it is noted that it is only 79 words in total length (ibid.). This is important to note because the brief description of Title II within NCLB (2001) does not exhibit a level of depth in understanding on not only defining what improving teacher quality meant, but defining how principals can support the improvement of teacher quality through their enactment of instructional leadership. Furthermore, Title II makes repeated use of the terms subject-matter knowledge, academic subjects, or academic content standards. There is a great deal of emphasis on teacher development in the area of curriculum and content knowledge, but in a section that was supposedly devoted to improve the quality of teaching, there is little discussion about how teachers can achieve enhanced capacity for content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Furthermore, leadership is mentioned only twice in Title II stating that principals need to have the instructional leadership skills to help teachers teach and to help students meet the challenges within the content standards set forth by their respective state governments. Title II does not go into any further detail as to how leaders are to develop the skills necessary to meet these demands.

The program blueprint of No Child Left Behind (2001) fails to account for one large component: school leadership. As Helsing, Howell, Kegan, and Lahey (2008) point out: school leaders now have the responsibility to improve teaching and learning for an increasingly diverse student population, dexterously facilitate teaching learning and professional development, and navigate the pressing political climate and educational
reform context both at the state and federal levels (Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008). To complicate matters even more, much of the legislation surrounding education reform fails to account for the capacity and development of leadership (Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, & Weeks, 2007). When it comes to leadership, assumptions are being made that school leaders automatically possess the capacity for not just leadership, but the kind of change leadership that results in the school achievement outcomes desired from No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2010). Policy makers and other stakeholders are not taking into account the underlying attributes and hidden complexities of leadership.

Issues in Leader Development

Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, and Weeks (2007) discuss issues in leader development in the advent of No Child Left Behind (2001). The authors argue that policymakers have placed a large emphasis on reform efforts surrounding a direct connection to student learning, teacher recruitment and training, credentialing and evaluation, and curriculum issues surrounding the development of content standards, textbooks, standardized testing, and accountability (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Furthermore, the considerable role the principal must play in creating the necessary conditions for improving student learning outcomes has been overlooked (ibid).

Principals have experienced increasing demands through these reform efforts but leadership development has not sufficiently prepared principals with the capacity needed to meet these demands (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) highlight that preparation programs for principals in the U.S. have traditionally consisted of “a collection of courses regarding general management principles, school laws,
administrative requirements, and procedures, with little emphasis on knowledge about student learning, effective teaching, professional development, curriculum, and organizational change” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 4). Principals entering schools post-NCLB are under-prepared to meet the challenges of organizational improvement through instructional leadership and, therefore, the extent to which a principal feels prepared to meet the organizational challenges may influence the extent to which she is able to lead (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Helsing, Howell, Kegan, and Lahey (2008) examine leadership development through another lens but also support Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, and Weeks’ (2007) argument that school leaders have not been sufficiently trained to meet the varying demands placed on them to lead schools. Helsing et al. (2008) assert professional development programs need to employ a framework that tackles an individual’s immunities to change. The authors identify immunities to change as “the underlying barriers that prevent an individual from making progress towards a desired professional goal” (Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008, p. 441). At present, the authors assert that professional development programs do not address an individual’s underlying assumptions, beliefs, or mental models that give rise to levels of the kind of cognitive dissonance, or opposing thoughts and ideas that are needed to contemplate on the work needed to achieve a desired professional goal. Helsing et al. (2008) also argue that understanding the underlying behaviors and assumptions that lead principals to act is important because “their actions affect student achievement” (Helsing et al., 2008, p. 458).
The development and enactment of No Child Left Behind (2001) was thought to address the increasing need for innovation in preparing students for a 21st-century world (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). As the 21st-century approached, stakeholders discussed the need for future generations of students to be equipped with certain skills in order to be competitive in an increasingly global economy (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). Among these skills included students possessing the ability to: think critically and creatively, solve complex problems, possess collaboration skills, and be skilled with new forms of media (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). The call for action in preparing future generations of students with skills in innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability is juxtaposed by the demands for schools to meet the narrow and focused testing targets or Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) outlined in NCLB. As a result, principals, school leaders, and teachers are in constant tension in determining the appropriate direction to go with respect to improving teaching and learning for student achievement. Within the school context, the persistent threat of failing to meet AYP and the resulting consequences (e.g., public embarrassment, associated stigma, threats to school funding, school restructuring methods, and staff/faculty/administrative replacement) influence actions and decisions made by teachers and school administrators (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

**School Reform Efforts**

In the wake of NCLB, there have been a large number of efforts to address the gaps in student achievement and organizational performance. Yet, even with these reform efforts the focus has been placed on teaching and the needs of students and teachers rather than placing focus on developing the leadership needed to facilitate improvement
in teaching and learning. Three such reform efforts of note include the 21st Century Schools Movement (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008), Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, and Ed Hirsch’s Core Knowledge.

Schoen and Fusarelli (2008) discuss the 21st Century Schools reform movement as being “rooted in constructivist approaches” where educators, business leaders, and policy makers work to instill in students the essential skills that will be required in our rapidly changing and technology-driven global society (p. 183). Schoen and Fusarelli (2008) state that business and industry leaders are finding themselves in evolving global markets where there is rapid change with respect to communication, product development, and service and delivery systems. As a result, there is an increased need for a new type of workforce that “understands systems thinking, can work collaboratively, is flexible, innovative, resourceful, and able to access and apply new information to solve complex problems” (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008, p. 185). In order to prepare students with these imperative skills, instructional methods and practices must be cultivated and employed to meet these increasing demands (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). However, this educational reform movement continues to place emphasis on improving teaching and learning through improved instructional methods as opposed to providing resources for improving leadership capacity to lead instructional change.

Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools is another type of educational reform movement focused on improving student learning through providing a more comprehensive education. In providing what Sizer calls a comprehensive education, his organization aims to equip students with the “intellectual, emotional, and social habits and skills to become powerful and informed citizens who contribute actively toward a
democratic and equitable society” (retrieved from www.essentialschools.org, 2011). Sizer argues that no two schools are the same and, therefore, it is through increased professional collaboration that stakeholders can share practices and ideas that can help one another reach success. Resources provided by the organization center on improving classroom practice and organizational practice, but are lacking in developing leadership.

A final educational reform movement of focus is E.D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge. Hirsch asserts there is a “core” of knowledge that needs to be taught at each grade level with each grade level knowledge base building on the previous years’ of a student’s progress. This sequence of skill sets that students need to acquire lead to a narrowly focused curriculum that pushes students to the next level within that learning continuum. The curriculum is focused and narrow, starting at kindergarten and builds into 12th grade in the following subject areas: visual arts, world history, American history, math, science, geography, language arts, and music (retrieved from www.coreknowledge.org, 2011). However, much like Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, resources provided by the organization center on instructional improvement and do not provide much support in the development of leadership.

The reform efforts among 21st Century Schools, Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, and Hirsch’s Core of Knowledge appeal to both sides of the NCLB conundrum regarding preparing students for a 21st-century society while meeting the focused performance targets in high-stakes standardized testing. The 21st Century Schools movement focuses on providing students with the skills necessary to compete in our evolving global economy (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). The Coalition of Essential Schools has the look of a constructivist model of education (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). The
Coalition of Essential Schools model attempts to help students, mentored by teachers, to construct meaning of their learning and develop interest in a collaborative setting. Core Knowledge, on the other hand, seems to model a more direct model of instruction where well-developed and carefully crafted lessons are derived from specific and targeted learning objectives. One commonality between these three reform efforts lies in the approach to educational reform focused on classroom instruction, but lacking clear approaches to cultivating leadership that supports these reform efforts.

From the literature presented here, educational reform efforts do share a common goal that involves increasing students’ academic performance and closing the persisting achievement gap. From policy in No Child Left Behind (2001) to reform efforts like 21st Century Schools, the Coalition of Essential Schools and Core Knowledge, all stakeholders involved are looking to find what will work to improve educational outcomes for all students and to, finally, close the achievement gap. Despite these reform efforts highlighted by Hargreaves and Goodson (2006), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006), and Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, and Weeks (2007), we are continuing to find ourselves in the same conundrum involving ways to improve the academic performance and achievement of the students we teach – even after the implementation of No Child Left Behind (2001).

Statement of the Problem

The accountability mechanisms with No Child Left Behind (2001) infer that the role of the principal is becoming more and more complex. Principals are faced with an increase in responsibility for ensuring school performance targets are met for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and the Academic Performance Index (API), which measures
performance on high-stakes standardized tests. This increase in responsibility has also increased a need for identifying strategies and methods principals and other school leaders can utilize to improve organizational performance specific to improving instructional practice.

Principals are expected to change instructional practice and support increased student learning, but do not necessarily have the appropriate support in order to effectively lead in this capacity. Educational reform efforts and educational policy such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2010) do not specifically outline appropriate support measures for fostering leader development in instructional improvement. Yet, principals still are expected and responsible for enacting change in an era of increased school accountability, but with a persisting absence of the adequate and necessary support that will enable them to effectively lead.

Thus, a principal is often left to lead an organization, under-prepared and under-supported, while relying on her own perception of how she should lead given what she already knows. The problem, then, lies with the principal’s actions and leadership practices infrequently translating into actions that are likely to create improvements in teaching and student learning. As a result, our schools are filled with well-meaning principals who cannot create the kind of change they are expected to make (Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, & Weeks, 2007; Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

Factors like a leader’s level of self-efficacy, mental models, levels of creative thinking, and one’s immunities to change are factors that have not been traditionally
considered as being important in educational reform, especially in cultivating an understanding in what enables a leader to even possess the capacity to accomplish the tasks she sets out to accomplish (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011; Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008; Sternberg, 2007). To understand what influences leadership practice, we must engage in a deeper examination of the interaction of an principal’s level of leader self-efficacy, mental models, leader creativity, and her immunities to change, and how the intersection of these elements influence the capacity of leadership practices aimed at achieving organizational change. No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2010) and other reform efforts have placed a great deal of focus on the instructional perspective of the educational reform argument, much to the detriment of discussing how leadership builds the very instructional capacity needed to create change.

The purpose of this study focused on the intersection of a principal’s level of leader self-efficacy, mental models, leader creativity, and her immunities to change, and how the interaction of these elements lead the principal to employ organizational practices that promote a culture of inquiry while cultivating and maintaining organizational relationships that lead to the possibility of fostering and achieving organizational improvement.

**Research Question**

The following question guided my inquiry:

- To what extent does a principal’s own mental models, level of leader self-efficacy, her immunities to change, and her level of leader creativity influence the principal’s ability to enact her style of leadership in fostering and achieving organizational improvement?
Importance of the Study

This study focused on the leadership elements linked to one’s leader self-efficacy, mental models, immunities to change, and leader creativity, which are believed to influence principal practices that promote a culture of inquiry and cultivate in-group/out-group organizational relationships in an effort to foster and achieve organizational improvement. This study contributes to the limited literature and empirical research that exists with respect to leader self-efficacy, leader creativity, immunities to change, and mental models influencing a principal’s leadership practices. Furthermore, this study contributes to the increased need for understanding the importance of leader development as we continue to move forward in this age of accountability. Finally, the study’s implications and findings may prove useful to current and aspiring administrators who desire to improve their capacity for leadership and achieving instructional improvement.

Methodology

A qualitative multi-case study was employed to examine the extent to which a principal’s leader self-efficacy, mental models, immunities to change, and leader creativity influenced the leadership practices that lead a principal to the possibility of achieving organizational improvement. The multi-case study was conducted focusing on two high schools where the principals were working with their leadership teams and faculty members in attempting to achieve a desired level of organizational change. The two high schools studied consisted of a school that were an independent charter and a school that was a non-charter, both operating within the same district. Data collection occurred at each site separately in an effort to keep all data organized and clearly distinguished between the schools. Formal interviews were conducted with both the
principals and several faculty members. I conducted direct observations of, professional development meetings, faculty meetings and leadership team meetings of which the school principals were either facilitators or active participants. Principal Shadow Day observations were also conducted to observe the Principal in action during a typical workday.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study two assumptions are made. First, it was assumed that responses gathered from the individual interviews with the principals were truthful as their responses were self-reported. Second, it was assumed that behaviors and dialogue observed within faculty meetings were typical on any given day outside of the days I observed.

Limitations

There are five limitations identified with this study. First, there is a limitation in the generalizability of this study as I am focusing on only two high schools. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether the results obtained from this study can be replicated at additional schools or in different organizational contexts. Second, the timeline of data collection will only span two months versus a nine-month academic year and may not allow for enough data to be collected to gain deep enough insight into whether or not instructional improvement is achieved by the principal. Third, the qualitative nature of the study and the small number of participants interviewed only provides individual portraits that are, perhaps, unique to the school and the individual principal and may not be representative of the entire population of principals in California schools. Fourth, answers obtained from participants cannot be anticipated to coincide with the questions
asked within my own instrumentation. Finally, my own researcher bias acts as a limitation as the inferences I make from the observations and interview notes are made from my own lens and may not always align with what the participants are thinking when providing their responses.

**Delimitations**

There are three delimitations, or the characteristics that limit the scope of the study’s inquiry as indicated by the researcher, within this study. The first involves school site selection as I am purposefully sampling the school sites for my case study. The second delimitation involves the timeline established for data collection where I will spend two months at the selected school sites. Third, my instrumentation and measures for data collection and analysis, such as interview protocols, will be established by me and implemented by me.
Definition of Terms

**Academic Performance Index (API)** – In California, the API was established as law in 1999; the law was established in an attempt to generate an academic accountability system for K-12 public schools. The API is calculated using student performance scores from standardized state assessments in multiple content areas. The API score range for a school is from 200 (low) to 1000 (high). (California Department of Education, 2010).

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)** - A set of annual academic performance benchmarks that states, school districts, schools, and subpopulations of students are supposed to meet and achieve if the state is receiving funding under Title I, Part A of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

**Alignment** – The extent to which curriculum, instruction, textbooks and other instructional materials, assessments, teacher preparation and professional development, and systems of accountability all reflect and reinforce the educational program’s objectives and standards.

**Assessment** – A test students take to measure academic knowledge and skills; can also refer to a system for testing and evaluating students, groups of students, schools or districts.

**Benchmark:** A specific level of student achievement expected and established for students at particular ages, grades, or developmental levels.

**California Standards Test:** Exams that are a part of the Standards Testing and Reporting (STAR) program and are based on the state’s academic content standards.

**Core Academic Standards:** The basic K-12 academic content standards that are assessed at the statewide level for the state’s testing system.
**Curriculum:** The course of study offered by a school or district influenced by the state’s academic content standards.

**Professional Development:** Programs that allow teachers or administrators to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs successfully.

**Professional Learning Communities:** An organizational practice in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and then develop goals and plans to act on what they learn in order to improve teaching and learning for student outcomes.