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A Phenomenological Study of Chicago's Independent School Principals

Jerry Travlos
DePaul University

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHICAGO'S INDEPENDENT SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

DePaul University
College of Education

A Capstone in Education with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

Jerry Travlos

Doctor of Education

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Signatory Page

I approve the capstone of Jerry Travlos.

Barbara Stacy Rieckhoff

Barbara Stacy Rieckhoff, PhD
Associate Dean, Associate Professor
DePaul University
Capstone Advisor

4/28/20

Date

Certification of Authorship

I certify that I am the sole author of this capstone. Any assistance received in the preparation of this dissertation has been acknowledged and disclosed within it. Any sources utilized, including the use of data, ideas and words, those quoted directly or paraphrased, have been cited. I certify that I have prepared this capstone according to program guidelines, as directed.

Author Signature  Date 4/28/20

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 identifies principals and teachers as equally important components of effective schools. Competent and skillful principals are needed to improve struggling schools and maintain high performing schools. Despite their importance, Chicago's principals are leaving their schools in high numbers. The systems that surround, support, and retain principals are failing. Reacting to the large number of principal departures and a lack of qualified replacements, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) added principal leadership capacity and retention as priorities to their reform efforts. School improvement efforts are undercut when principals depart their roles prior to making sustainable impact. Seeking to identify and retain quality principals, Chicago implemented the Independent School Principals (ISP) program in 2016 to reward deserving principals with autonomy from district supervision. This study employed the use of phenomenological methods to examine the lived experiences of Chicago's independent principals. Interviews were used as the primary source of data.

Overarching themes emerged that embodied and exemplified the essence of the autonomy experienced by Chicago's independent principals. These overarching themes are listed as follows:

- Independent principals are deeply mindful of their schools' unique needs;
- Independent principals are free from a network structure of oversight and accountability that is fragmented, stressful, and consumes valuable leadership time;
- Independent principals feel valued and rewarded for their demonstrated success;
- Independent principals feel isolated as part of the ISP program;
- Independent principals use their autonomy to select curricula, assessments, and professional development that work best for their schools;
- Independent principals have more authority and time to be collaborative, creative, and resourceful in meeting the needs of their students, teachers, and communities;
- Independent principals give generously of their time and talents by mentoring new principals and supporting district initiatives.

Based on the research findings and literature, I propose the following recommendations for enhancing the autonomous experience of Chicago's independent principals. The recommendations are listed as follows:

- Annually provide independent principals with a suite of options to choose from that include budget, network, and management supports;
 - Allow Network Chiefs to recruit independent principals to join their networks as mentors and professional learning community leaders to improve the quality and variety of professional development offerings;
 - Expand peer principal evaluations to include all principals as a way to promote collaboration between traditional and independent principals;
 - Provide independent principals the authority to make changes to the academic calendar and instructional day to better serve their school communities;
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- Provide independent principals with additional school funding and greater spending flexibility to support innovation in their schools;
- Annually survey independent principals to gather information and feedback on their experiences;
- Annually publish a list of independent principals along with their contact information, areas of expertise, participation in district initiatives, and professional accomplishments to support administrators seeking guidance and help;
- Develop a career pathway for promoting independent principals into Network Chief and other CPS senior leadership roles.

Capturing the lived experiences of CPS principals that apply for and are awarded autonomy through the ISP program is complex. Three positive outcomes are evident. Autonomy benefits principals, school communities, and CPS. Autonomy fosters independence, freedom, and self-reliance within principals. Lastly, autonomy has a powerful impact on how work gets done in schools.

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BACKGROUND

In 2015 the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) faced a shortage of talented and qualified leaders to fill a growing number of school principal vacancies. Nearly a decade of student achievement gains and school performance improvements were in jeopardy of being reversed due to principal departures and a lack of qualified replacements (CPEF, 2015; Rangel, 2018). Seeking to address this problem CPS created several leadership programs to attract, identify, train, and retain strong principals: Chicago Leadership Collaborative; Chicago Principals Fellowship; and Independent School Principals (ISP). This study examines the lived experiences of Chicago's independent principals.

Launched in 2016, the objectives of the ISP program were to reward high-performing principals with increased autonomy, expand their impact through meaningful leadership and innovative collaboration, and build systems and structures to support increased autonomy (Department of Principal Quality, 2017). This study focuses on Chicago's independent principals and describes the essence of being an autonomous principal in Chicago.

This study uses phenomenological methods to gather data and describe the lived experiences of independent principals. The aim of phenomenology is to study the essence of human experience and to seek to understand the commonalities of those experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Also, principals' perceptions of autonomy and its impact on their leadership are explored. Background information on the urban principalship along with how the role functions in Chicago is discussed. Shifts in school management and efforts to retain principals are explored too.

The School Principal Role

Over the past four decades, the importance of school principals and their impact on student learning has received increased attention from educational reformers and policymakers seeking to improve schools and outcomes for students (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Researchers agree that teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement, but principals play a key role in creating conditions for impactful teaching and learning to occur (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood, Luis, Anderson, & Wahlstron, 2004). Successful principals establish and convey organizational vision influencing the teaching and learning environments for their staff and students. Likewise, principals build professional capacity among faculty, develop support structures for students, and welcome external partners to help with school improvement efforts (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Across the United States, the urban principalship is changing as reforms take shape and new school management structures emerge to improve outcomes for students such as Charter, Contract, Site-Based, and Autonomous (Kim, Field, & Hassel, 2019). Contributing to the complexities of the role are rapid curriculum innovations, higher standards for academic performance, increased emphasis on student testing, comprehensive accountability measures, and fierce competition between schools for attracting students (Portin, 2000). The time and attention of principals are being stretched in multiple directions as responsibilities continually increase to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society. Not only are principals managing core operations, people, and school relations but increasingly they are asked to address the economic and social ills of society (O'Connor, Hales, Davies, & Tomlinson, 1999).

In urban school districts like New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Chicago, principals report many external challenges to their work. Challenges include navigating large bureaucratic systems, working with limited local resources and revenue, a higher percentage of students at risk for school failure, high poverty rates, and large rates of limited English proficiency (Portin, 2000). In addition, principals report dealing with aging facilities, high rates of teacher turnover, inadequate training of employees, lack of student and family supports, and greater accountability making the job seem nearly impossible (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). As districts hold principals more accountable to how their schools perform, fewer people are interested in taking on a job that is described by many as having massive expectations, overwhelming pressures to succeed, long hours, and inadequate pay (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). As a result, principal turnover is on the rise.

Principal turnover is defined as choosing to leave one's school, district, or position as well as exiting from the field of education all together (Rangel, 2018). Principal turnover rates vary widely across states, districts, and types of schools. During the 2015-16 schoolyear 20% of principals left their schools after one year (Goldring & Taie, 2018). In Texas between 1995 and 2001 on average almost 30% of public-school principals left their schools after one year (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2009). Similarly, Illinois lost nearly 21% of their principals each year between 2001 and 2008 to changes in schools, districts, states, positions, or retirement (DeAngelis & White, 2011). While turnover is a significant concern because of the important role principals play in leading school improvement efforts, it should be noted that school leadership changes are associated with both negative and positive outcomes. The departure of a disgruntled and ineffective principal who is replaced by a highly motivated and productive principal provides an organizational benefit. Conversely, principals who make positive and impactful contributions to their schools and leave unexpectedly negatively impact the progress of their schools. It can be said that the turnover of effective and stable school leadership undermines the trust, morale, teacher efficacy, and academic achievement of schools (Miller, 2009; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

Constant turnover in principal leadership makes it difficult for schools to implement initiatives and programs that are sustainable and produce results over time. According to Fullan (2001), stable principal leadership begins to yield results in about five to seven years. When principals prematurely depart their schools, student performance declines and teacher turnover increases resulting in a slowdown of school improvement efforts (Fullan, 2001; Rangel, 2018). Principal turnover is a serious issue across America. A 2017 national survey of public school principals reported the average turnover rate as approximately 18% and in high poverty schools the rate was 21% (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Concerns over high levels of principal turnover have resulted in a growing body of research on its cause. According to Rangel (2018), there are three major predictors of principal turnover: autonomy, relationships, and the nature of the position. When principals report feelings of satisfaction on any of these predictors they stay longer in their roles (Rangel, 2018; Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2010). A correlation between job satisfaction and principal turnover is evident.

The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics and administered seven times between 1987 through 2011 covered a wide range of topics such as teacher demand, teacher and principal characteristics, general conditions in schools, principals' and teachers' perceptions, compensation, and district hiring practices. Parts of the 2007-8 SASS collected information on principals' perceptions of their influence, enthusiasm for their work, and worthiness of their jobs. Each of these components is believed to contribute to an overall feeling of job satisfaction (Berry, 2014; Rangel, 2018; Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2010). Principals

who expressed low influence over academic standards, selecting curriculum, hiring and evaluating teachers, setting discipline policies, and building spending were 23% more likely to leave their roles (Berry, 2014). Principals reporting no longer being enthusiastic about their work were 12% more likely to leave their roles (Berry, 2014). Principals who felt strongly that the stress of their roles were no longer worth it were 15% more likely to leave their jobs (Berry, 2014). Lastly, principals who expressed they contemplated a transfer from their current schools were nearly 39% more likely to depart (Berry, 2014). When a principal considers leaving their job and expresses that desire openly, the likelihood of departure is strong.

Like urban principals everywhere, CPS principals are expected to be dynamic leaders with strong operational skills for managing budgets, human resources, facilities, community engagement, marketing, and test compliance (Bruzgulis, Hart, & Young, 2019). With the weight of school success resting on them, CPS principals describe the demands of the role as relentless, overwhelming, and stressful (Bruzgulis, Hart, & Young, 2019; Spillane & Lee, 2014). With Chicago's annual principal turnover rate above the average for urban school districts in states like Florida, New York, and Texas, policy makers and school reformers are seeking to understand the contributing factors of this phenomenon and to reverse the trend (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012).

The CPS Principalship

Illinois legislative action along with Chicago Board of Education policy changes have made the Chicago principalship one of America's most unique administrative roles. With the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 followed by the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995, the principalship transformed into a complex job demanding countless hours of work, outstanding problem-solving skills, and creativity in formulating effective school improvement plans. As a result, CPS principals assumed responsibilities for local budgeting, hiring, and curriculum development. Also, Local School Councils (LSC) are organized and elected in every school with the authority to hire, evaluate, retain, and dismiss principals along with approving and monitoring their budgets and school improvement plans. The role fundamentally changed with the elimination of principal tenure and the increase of school accountability systems based largely on standardized test results.

On average, principals of urban schools report working 60 hours per week (Hitt & Tucker, 2019). The work spans activities across managerial, instructional, and political realms and is often described as fragmented, fast-paced, and varied (Spillane & Lee, 2014). A 2008 study of CPS principals conducted by the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) reported five major barriers to school improvement that prevented principals from doing their jobs well and as causing them to experience feelings of stress, burnout, and wanting to leave their roles. The identified barriers were pressure to raise test scores, social problems in the school and community, difficulty removing ineffective teachers, working with parents perceived as apathetic, and difficulty hiring the right staff (Stoelinga, 2008). Also, approximately 50% of CPS principals identified themselves as inexperienced meaning they were new to the role or working within their initial four-year contracts (Stoelinga, 2008). The Chicago principalship is said to be difficult to navigate for both novice and experienced leaders due to the complex nature of the work and the pressures to improve (CCSR, 2008).

In a follow-up study conducted by CSSR in 2018 the five barriers to school improvement identified by principals increased to six with financial concerns being added (Bruzgulis, Hart, &

Young, 2019). With the adoption of a student-based budgeting model in 2014 by CPS, principals find it difficult to fund school improvement plans properly and feel pressure to seek external funding to supplement declining budgets (Bruzgulis et al., 2019). Financial concerns rank highest among the six barriers identified by CPS principals (CCSR, 2018).

Keeping Chicago's Principals

In 2015 the Chicago Public Education Fund (CPEF) reported that 60% of CPS principals left before the end of their fifth year and that 40% of active principals were making plans to leave within the next three years. Policy makers became alarmed with the rapid departure of principals and were concerned it would lead to a decline in school achievement and performance results (CPEF, 2015; Fullan, 2001; Rangel, 2018). CPS became at-risk of having its school improvement efforts come to a halt because principals were leaving in large numbers. Overwhelming demands, increased responsibilities, labor disputes, staffing shortages, and fiscal challenges made the job feel impossible (CPEF, 2015).

Despite the difficulties, Chicago's principals describe the job as rewarding (Bruzgulis et al., 2019; CPEF, 2015). Principals express feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment in making a difference in the lives of their students and in contributing to school improvement efforts (Bruzgulis et al., 2019; CPEF, 2015). Likewise, principals report personal growth and at times enjoy the challenges of the role. Compensation is perceived as adequate but not a factor as to whether principals stay or leave (Bruzgulis et al., 2019; CPEF, 2015). What CPS principals are seeking is a reduction in compliance mandates that take them away from valuable time to impact teaching and learning (CPEF, 2015). Principals want more time to coach teachers, observe classrooms, and work with students and families. In addition, greater flexibility is sought in organizing budgets, schedules, and curriculum to advance school goals and priorities. Lastly, principals want tailored professional development opportunities and tools to respond to the needs of their individual schools (Bruzgulis et al., 2019; CPEF, 2015).

Chicago's Shift from Site-Based Management to Autonomy

School reform efforts of the 1990's saw a national emergence of decentralized efforts to improve the overall performance of schools. Many urban districts like New York, Chicago, and Oakland adopted site-based management policies. Participatory decision-making was believed to lead to higher staff morale and effective organizations (Lashway, 1997). The premise of site-based management is the shifting of decision-making governance away from districts and central administrative offices to individual schools. Local schools become empowered to innovate and to make meaningful and sustainable changes to teaching and learning (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). The site-base management policies of the 1990's were the precursors to the current autonomy movement. The concept of school autonomy functions under a similar premise in that schools and student outcomes will improve by making those closest to the delivery of services more independent and more responsible for results (Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1993).

In 2005 CPS introduced autonomy to its schools through the Autonomous Management and Performance Schools (AMPS) program. Select schools based mostly on student performance metrics were granted autonomy from district and area authority to lead local innovation efforts. The AMPS program was intended to be a catalyst for new ideas and a strategy for retaining and attracting high quality principals. This would then free up time and resources allowing CPS to

focus on schools with greater need (Sartain et al., 2009). A newly elected mayor and newly appointed Chicago Board of Education cancelled the AMPS program in 2011. Lamenting the loss of their autonomies, AMPS principals returned to a traditional model of school oversight and management.

Between 2011 and 2017 CPS saw a twenty-seven percentage-point increase in high school graduation rates along with accelerated learning growth for students in grades three through eight (Kelleher, 2018). Chicago's elementary school students performed better than 96% of all school districts in the United States (Kelleher, 2018). Principal quality is highlighted as a key driver of this success. Since the early 2000s, CPS has focused on increasing the principal pipeline and helping sitting principals improve their instructional leadership. Despite the record accomplishments, many CPS principals chose to leave their schools. During this same time period, hundreds of principals retired, resigned, or sought employment opportunities outside the district. With a sense of urgency due to a shortage of qualified school leaders, CPS increased their efforts to attract and retain talented principals. In 2016 with nearly half of all principals gone and the other half making plans to leave, CPS prioritized recruiting, training, developing, and retaining principals as part of their school improvement efforts (CPEF, 2015).

Needing to recruit, develop, and keep strong principal leaders who are dedicated to their schools, CPS launched the ISP program in 2016. The objectives of the program are to reward high-performing principals with increased autonomy, expand their impact through meaningful leadership and innovative collaboration, and to build systems and structures that support increased autonomy (Department of Principal Quality, 2017). The focus of this study is on CPS principals that applied for and have been accepted into the ISP program. Phenomenological methods will be used to gather data and to describe the lived experiences of independent principals along with their perceptions of autonomy and its impacts on their leadership.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Among school related factors principal leadership is second only to classroom instruction in contributing to student learning and achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). The complex academic, social, and technical demands placed on principals while managing staff, students, parents, instruction, and daily operations are overwhelming. Principals feel isolated, unappreciated, stressed, and overwhelmed with expectations and workload (Ozer, 2013). External and internal pressures to succeed often lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and burnout. Along with a growing emphasis on accountability, the job has become unattractive and has resulted in shortages of qualified candidates and the early departure of others (Ozer, 2013).

Like other large urban districts facing similar challenges, CPS is using autonomy as a reform initiative to provide principals with freedoms to redesign systems, allocate funding, prioritize work, collaborate with people, and manage operations with less pressure and scrutiny from above in hopes of improving schools (Pyne, 2014). Simultaneously, the expectations are that principals will be more effective, feel more satisfied, and remain longer at their schools. There is little information as to how autonomy granted through Chicago's ISP program affects the principalship and the people working in those roles.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of Chicago's independent school principals along with their perceptions of autonomy and its impact on their leadership. By studying the phenomenon of autonomy along with collecting the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of independent principals, the shared experiences of these unique school leaders can be understood by others. The findings of this study are intended to be used by CPS and other large urban school districts to better understand autonomy and its impact on leadership, school improvement, and job satisfaction.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The ISP program provides select principals with independence from centralized and network control. This is the second attempt by CPS to foster innovation and improve systems by rewarding principals with autonomy. This study explores the experiences of Chicago's independent school principals and seeks to understand the essence of their autonomy.

This study explored five research questions. What are the lived experiences of CPS principals that apply for and are awarded autonomy through the ISP program? What beliefs do independent school principals have about traditional versus autonomous models of management? How do independent school principals perceive their autonomy? How do independent school principals use their autonomy? How does autonomy impact their leadership?

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN

Phenomenology was used to examine the lived experiences of Chicago's independent school principals. Phenomenology is both a philosophical and methodological approach that allows for the exploration of deeper meaning and understanding (Smith, Flowers, & Larken, 2009). The aim of phenomenology is to study the essence of human experience and to seek to understand the commonalities of those experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This research approach is attributed to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and his belief that by seeking to understand the depth and rigor of essential experiences one could then illustrate those given experiences to others (Smith et al., 2009).

Since phenomenology is the study of conscious structures as experienced from the first-person point of view, interviews were used to collect data. This is based on the premise that the experiences of individuals and groups can be accessible to others through in-depth dialogue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology allowed for the experiences of independent school principals to be collected, analyzed, and understood.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilized because of the descriptive orientation used in seeking understanding (Smith et al., 2009). Understanding and describing the experiences of Chicago's independent school principals required collecting their thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and experiences through interviews. As anticipated, study participants reported on how the ISP program and autonomy have impacted their leadership along with their professional and personal experiences and feelings. The premise for using phenomenology is that

participants have unique experiences that can be explored through interviews. It is expected that commonalities in the experiences of the participants will emerge.

Member checks were used as a participant validation technique to ensure data credibility. Member checks allow study participants to challenge interpretations by creating conditions for them to speak with the researcher about the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Credibility involves establishing the truth of the research findings through a process that allows for study participants to verify the accuracy of their statements and transcripts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Each participant received an emailed and mailed copy of their transcript for review. They were asked to read, edit, or add to what was shared during the interview and recorded in the transcripts. Participants were asked to reflect on guiding questions that helped authenticate the exactness of the information. Did the transcript reflect and echo with your thoughts and perceptions? Is there anything problematic with the transcript? Is there anything the transcript did not capture? Actively engaging with and responding to the participants' critiques, comments, interpretations, and changes are important techniques for validating data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Follow-up conversations were conducted to discuss the transcripts, their reflections, and to ask additional questions.

RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The importance of school leadership in advancing student achievement and school performance is evident in the many initiatives CPS has instituted to attract, train, reward and retain school leaders. From Principal Achievement Award bonuses to executive leadership training at the Kellogg School of Business, efforts to incentivize and retain quality principals continue to grow. The most recent and least studied initiative to reward and retain principals is the granting of autonomy through the ISP program. Recipients are granted autonomy from district and network authority and given predetermined freedoms to make curriculum, instructional, professional development, and budgetary decisions.

This study describes the lived experiences of CPS principals in the ISP program. Initiatives in large urban school districts are often created without an understanding of their implications, impact, and results. Quasi reforms in name only do nothing to change or improve circumstances except for generating temporary media hype. Understanding how autonomy granted to independent principals shapes their thoughts, feelings, decisions, actions, and work is important in discerning how the ISP program impacts school leadership. This study is intended to inform policy and practice in supporting the work of Chicago's principals.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

For twenty-six years, I have been employed by CPS as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Since 2003, I have worked as principal of Smyser Elementary School serving Chicago's Portage Park and Dunning communities. During my tenure as principal, I participated in numerous professional learning experiences to increase my knowledge of curriculum, instruction, coaching, budgeting, community development, and systems management. I attended several training programs such as the Chicago Executive Leadership Academy, Chicago Principals Fellowship, and Courageous Principals. I have been recognized as a Distinguished Principal, Autonomous

Principal, and most recently an Independent Principal. I coach and mentor resident and new to role principals and serve as a CPS principal eligibility assessor.

I believe, no great school exists without a great principal. It is my opinion that improvements in CPS can largely be attributed to innovative school principals who accept accountability and believe in the power of transformational leadership. This belief is why I decided to seek autonomy. Beyond the stated outcomes of the CPS Department of Principal Quality, I believe an implicit goal of the ISP program is to increase the retention of high performing principals while giving others something to aspire towards.

Using a phenomenological approach, I captured the essence of being an independent principal and described how it affects the principalship. I constructed the epistemological beliefs of independent principals across different geographic CPS networks using social constructivism as an interpretive framework. Representative sampling was used to select participants for primary interviews.

RESEARCHER ASSUMPTIONS

In conducting this research, the assumptions made were that participation is voluntary and that the ISP program designation is viewed by others as a prestigious honor and reward. As an independent principal with twenty-six years of service in CPS, I expected research participants to be comfortable and candid in sharing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings with me. I refrained from projecting my own opinions, thoughts, and experiences during the interviews and data collection. I expected participants to possess deep leadership experiences and to be independent for a minimum of one year at the time of this study. I anticipated participants would be motivated to share their stories and to contribute to the body of research about principal autonomy in Chicago.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMINOLOGY

Key terms in this study are autonomy and independent principal. Autonomy is generally described as the decentralization of governance where decision making and management shifts to the local level by way of the principal (Friedman, 2002). The term independent principal refers to CPS principals that apply for and are granted autonomy through Chicago's ISP program. These principals accept expanded roles, responsibilities, and decision-making power in exchange for greater autonomy and accountability. Likewise, they are granted greater authority over personnel matters, funding, purchasing, scheduling, professional development, and school improvement.

The ISP program is designed for principals who can ensure continued strong performance with minimal oversight and who would benefit from additional independence to lead their schools. Annually, a competitive application, interview, and review process is used to identify and grant deserving principals autonomy. The expectations are that independent principals will expand their leadership capacities through collaboration and innovation and streamline systems and structures that support increased autonomy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of Chicago's independent school principals. The phenomenon of independence is unique to CPS and is predicated on the concept of school autonomy which is defined as the decentralization of schools resulting in the shifting of management and control to the local level (Friedman, 2002). This literature review provides an overview of school governance with a focus on urban school systems that adopted autonomous policies and how principals have utilized these freedoms.

A Nation at Risk

In 1983, the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* marked the beginning of a major shift in American education policy. The report called for reforms to public education due to low performing schools and districts that were failing students, families, and communities. Inconsistent and weak curriculum offerings allowing students to advance from one grade to the next with minimal effort were cited as reasons why public education became mediocre (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983). Test scores and graduation rates rapidly declined. At the time of the report, nearly twenty-three million Americans were identified as functionally illiterate (NCEE, 1983). It was believed the failures of public education would lead to the demise of the United States as a leading global, economic, and industrial power (Timar & Tyack, 1999). The publication of this report along with its negative forecast for America was a catalyst for the modern public education reform movement. This report caused school boards and educational leaders across the country to critically examine how business was conducted. Educators and reformers came together to rethink how school systems operate, how schools are designed, and how teaching and learning are pursued (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988). Legislation and policies supporting shifts in traditional school governance were passed in hopes of improving outcomes for students (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988; Timar & Tyack, 1999).

Free Market Theory

Standard bureaucratic structures that emphasized regulatory compliance were deemed to be one of the greatest barriers to improving schools and overall student performance. In the late 1980's free market theory as applied to public education suggested that if consumers choose their schools, quality would follow demand (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Private schools operating on this model were described as more competitive and effective. They were believed to have higher student achievement, ambitious academics, strong leadership, collaborative teachers, rigorous instruction, and be less bureaucratic (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Furthermore, parent choice was viewed as a way to eliminate the influence of external political groups and centralized governmental bodies that curbed the performance of public educational institutions.

Increasing Options for Parents

During the 1990's and 2000's significant increases in school choice options for parents occurred throughout the United States (Garn & Cobb, 2008). Legislation and policy changes at

the state level provided parents with alternatives to their local schools through school vouchers, tax credits, charter schools, and online learning. Choice options for parents shifted the focus of accountability from the central or district level to local schools where structural changes and school improvement efforts would be made based on consumer demand. Competition emerged among schools as ratings and reputations garnered importance with community leaders and parents (Garn & Cobb, 2008).

A free market environment required schools to operate, compete, and succeed by way of local quality controls that were immediate, effective, and decisive (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). School leaders at the local level needed decision making authority to manage resources, personnel, instruction, and school improvement plans. This commonly became known as site-based management (Lashway, 1997). Shifting decision making responsibilities away from boards, districts, superintendents, and central administrative offices to principals, teachers, and parents with high efficacy was thought to have a positive effect on student achievement. It was believed that site-based management encouraged innovation and a greater responsiveness to school improvement efforts at the local level (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998).

Site-Based Management

Site-based management seeks to decentralize policy by shifting governance and management decisions to local sites with the intention of improving schools and student outcomes (Mayer, Donaldson, LeChasseur, Welton, & Dobb, 2013). This approach is best described as a theory of action and not a strictly defined reform model because of varied implementation practices and measures of accountability (Mayer et al., 2013). According to Ouchi (2006), effective site-based management allows for local budgetary authority. This includes the hiring of teachers and staff, scheduling, purchasing products and services from vendors, selecting teaching methods, and organizing professional development training as needed. Typically, an elected or appointed committee of teachers, parents, and community members at each school serve in an advisory or decision-making capacity to allocate funds.

Early adopters of site-based management were Edmonton, Seattle, and Houston public schools (Ouchi, 2006). These three large school districts created policies that granted schools high levels of control over budgets, staffing, schedules, and teaching methods. Also, schools were required to market services and attract their own students. Administrative functions such as computing, auditing, transportation, food preparation, payroll, and construction remained at the district level.

In the 1970s the Edmonton Public Schools granted budgetary control to their local schools. This was followed by the introduction of a new mechanism for funding schools based on a weighted student formula. The change in funding accounted for varying family and student demographics such as income level, language needs, academic, cognitive, and physical needs. This funding approach allowed for additional money to be granted to schools for enrolling and helping students with diverse needs. In addition, a school choice plan was instituted allowing parents the option of enrolling their children in any school. Simultaneously, a school accountability system measuring student achievement and budgetary performance was enacted. Parents, students, and staff rated their principals and schools annually while principals rated their district leaders and school boards. Teachers and parents reported feeling empowered in making budgetary and instructional decisions for their schools (Ouchi, 2006).

In the 1990s Houston and Seattle followed the lead of Edmonton and implemented similar site-based management policies including a weighted funding model for its public schools. Local schools and principals were given decision-making authority over their budgets and a comprehensive system for measuring school performance was introduced. Site-based management became a catalyst for the development of a greater variety of schools that previously had been very similar. Under this new management approach, schools became increasingly responsive to their communities finding innovative ways to organize instructional programming, develop external partnerships, and ensure quality instruction. When compared to similar centralized districts, Edmonton, Houston, and Seattle demonstrated greater overall student performance and success in reducing the achievement gaps between racial groups (Ouchi, 2006).

A Shift from Site-Based Management to Autonomy

The decentralization of school districts through site-based management required principals to shift from the role of manager to leader. Curricular and instructional decisions formerly made at the district or state level shifted to teachers, parents, community members, and leaders at the local school level. Principals who previously were charged with being instructional managers had to adopt collaborative practices to motivate constituent groups. Teachers, parents, students, and community members were asked to provide input and share in all operational and educational decisions made at the school level. Principals were held responsible for transforming schools by inspiring those working with them to higher levels of commitment, energy, and moral purpose (Robinson, Lloyd, & Row, 2008). The new expanded role of principal as transformational leader involved ambiguity and uncertainty as emphasis was placed on distributing decision making authority among members of the school community. Principals looked to partner with teachers as important sources of expertise in identifying problems and setting goals as determined by those inside the school rather than by those at the central office level (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Ultimately, the role of the principalship became less about district compliance and more focused on local school improvement and accountability related to student outcomes (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992).

The Importance of School Leadership

As the principal's importance increased with site-based management, effective school leadership became essential for successful student outcomes to occur. Effective principals influence student learning by acting as catalysts for innovation to happen while working hard to attract and retain effective teachers who in turn improve student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2008). Further, effective principals create shared visions, develop people, redesign systems, build productive relationships with others, connect their schools to the broader community, and manage instruction (Steinberg & Cox, 2017).

Effective school leaders build vision and set direction fostering the acceptance of group goals while demonstrating high performance expectations. They understand and develop people, provide individualized support when needed, and model appropriate values and behaviors. They redesign their organizations by building collaborative cultures along with productive relationships between their schools and families. They manage teaching and learning programs, teacher development, and supervise school events. Lastly, effective principals get to the core business of monitoring teaching and learning for results (Leithwood et al., 2008; Steinberg & Cox, 2017).

With principal leadership second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to student learning and achievement, external and internal pressures to succeed are overwhelming (Leithwood, Luis, Anderson, & Wahlstron, 2004). The academic, social, and technical demands placed on today's principals are complex. Managing staff, students, parents, instruction, and daily operations demands immense time making it difficult to recruit and retain principals (Ozer, 2013). According to Goldring and Taie (2018), one in five principals working during the 2015-16 school year left their school after one year. Additionally, one out of every two principals were not retained beyond their third year of leading a school (Levin & Bradley, 2019). These principal attrition trends were alarming and resulted in shortages of qualified candidates to fill vacancies.

School districts often struggle to find suitable and experienced candidates to replace departing principals because the job is difficult and the skills needed to be successful are unique (Fink & Bryman, 2006; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). As states and districts seek to increase principal recruitment and retention rates, autonomy has become a favorable human capital strategy for doing so (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

School principals play an important role in leading school improvement efforts (Rangel, 2018). It is difficult for schools to implement new policies, programs, and commit to school improvement efforts without a qualified and experienced leader. Professional freedoms, relationships, and the changing nature of the principalship are identified as predictors of principal turnover (Rangel, 2018). According to Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011), principals who perceived a sense of professional freedom and autonomy were more likely to stay in their positions. When given the authority to negotiate managerial demands and administrative tasks, principals shifted their work to creating collaborative cultures that focused on improving student achievement and adult learning. According to Fullan (2011), teacher coaching and development has the potential to produce significant improvements in school performance. When given opportunities to increase the quality, purposefulness, and impact of their work, principals reported strong feelings of satisfaction (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010).

Principal Autonomy

For generations, the role of the school principal had been viewed as mostly supervisory with delineated administrative powers (Perez, Milstein, Wood, Jacquez, 1999). Principals were granted transactional authority to follow district policies, execute budgetary priorities, implement curriculum initiatives, and accept hiring decisions made at the district or central office level. Transactional authority is defined as governance through compliance and performance monitoring. Typically, principals managed and monitored organizational goals, expectations, and outcomes by closely supervising faculty, staff, students, and building operations hoping to keep parents and community members happy (Smith & Bell, 2011).

Today's school principals are expected to be transformational leaders developing systems to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes (Gawlik, 2008). The principalship has become a lever of change for increasing graduation rates, closing the achievement gap, and fostering innovation in schools. Likewise, the role requires fulfilling the expectations of elected officials, community members, parents, staff, and students. School principals face enormous pressure from supervisors and constituents to succeed as innovators of learning and performance driven managers. Without organizational flexibility from central office, the roles and responsibilities of principals become overwhelming and lead to dissatisfaction and early departure.

Social and economic demands of the last forty years dictate the need to examine student achievement data, school performance metrics, and post-secondary readiness to determine if schools are successfully preparing their students to be productive members of society (Ouchi, 2006). Despite many reform efforts, millions of students annually do not graduate high school. This disproportionately has impacted poor and minority youth. Along with reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning, today's students and tomorrow's workers require broad complex reasoning and technical skills to meet the demands of a constantly changing global economy (Hill, 2006).

Many states, school districts, and local governing bodies in America have begun employing autonomy as a reform strategy for improving their schools while also trying to attract and retain principals. Increased accountability, expectations, and responsibilities have made the principalship feel unsustainable. Feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy have resulted in principals prematurely leaving their schools to seek employment elsewhere. Studies of traditional school principal roles suggested success at one time was measured in part by carrying out central administration initiatives and directives (Perez et al., 1999). For the past two decades, educational reform initiatives have emphasized greater accountability for improving student attainment and school performance at the local level (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Policy makers are paying closer attention to organizational capacities and institutional relationships between schools and district bureaucracies (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Principals have come under immense pressure to lead their schools in ways that produce the very best outcomes for students despite bureaucratic restrictions that impede their ability to impact student achievement (Adamowski & Petrilli, 2007).

In meeting today's educational challenges, school principals are expected to be catalysts for innovation and change at the local level. In being responsive to their schools, successful school principals have demonstrated the following leadership skills: collaboration with constituency groups; school improvement planning; budget forecasting; talent management; curriculum planning; data analysis; and consensus building (Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Adamowski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007). A paradigm shift in how schools best operate has resulted in the use of principal autonomy as both a reform strategy and reward.

Principal autonomy can generally be described as the decentralization of governance where decision-making and management shifts to the local level by way of the principal (Friedman, 2002). In trying to improve schools over the last forty years, large urban districts like New York, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Boston, and Seattle have adopted similar approaches to decentralization by granting site-based management and control to principals (Ouchi, 2006). Often referred to as autonomous principals, these school leaders accept expanded roles, responsibilities, and decision-making power in exchange for greater accountability. Hiring practices, allocation of funds, purchasing, instructional priorities, and scheduling shift directly to them. Autonomous principals are expected to inspire school constituents to be active in developing missions, setting high standards, creating annual improvement plans, increasing student achievement, and operating fiscally sound institutions (Friedman, 2002). Simply, principal autonomy is having the power to do what is necessary to bring about positive school results.

Autonomous Principals as Agents of Change

Changing political, economic, and social pressures have resulted in heightened accountability for schools requiring them to succeed or face negative consequences such as punitive measures, reconstitution, or closure. Population changes, increased competition from

private and charter schools, and legislative policy reforms have resulted in tax dollars being shifted from the district level directly to schools on a per pupil basis. This is evident in many large urban districts and has resulted in heightened competition between schools for funding that comes with each enrollment (Gawlik, 2008; Ouchi, 2006).

Graduation rates, standardized test scores, college and career readiness rates, rigorous course offerings, extra-curricular activities, attendance, and safety are now being used as criteria for measuring school quality. Communities, families, and students are using this information to compare and select schools. Maintaining or increasing enrollment requires schools to attract students and families through innovative programs and positive trends in school performance. Likewise, elected officials have begun using enrollment and school performance data to make decisions on supporting, reconstituting, or closing schools. As a result, school reform advocates are recognizing the importance of quality principals in leading school improvement efforts in today's highly scrutinizing and accountable society. According to Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011), strong and visionary principals build positive school climate, understand and interpret policies to facilitate effective implementation, and mobilize teachers and community members in order to achieve school improvement.

Schools are complex learning and working organizations that require principals to possess leadership charisma, extensive curriculum knowledge, and strong managerial skills. Site-based management has expanded the role of the principalship beyond supervision and instruction. Today's principals are expected to meet accountability standards, develop improvement plans, formulate budgets, navigate collective bargaining agreements, promote student emotional and physical wellbeing, hire and train staff, collaborate with constituents, and complete annual reports (Fraser & Brock, 2006).

In trying to fully realize the potential benefits of site-based management to improve schools, education reformers have begun advocating for principal autonomy. Supporters of autonomy believe principals should be released from central office bureaucracies and given full control of their schools. Simultaneously, principals should be held accountable to parents, staff and students and be committed to market forces that produce efficient and effective schools (Pyne, 2014). Although comparisons between centralized and autonomous schools on student outcomes are fragmented, evidence has suggested that autonomous schools outperform traditional schools in overall student achievement and in reducing the achievement gaps between racial groups over time (Ouchi, 2006). In Chicago, schools headed by autonomous principals in their second year showed a significant increase in student reading proficiency rates compared to traditional principals (Steinberg, 2014). According to Healy (2015), when given flexibility and freedom, autonomous principals have increased school performance at a faster rate, but time is needed to leverage these powers.

Dimensions of Principal Autonomy

Reform efforts that decentralize school governance and allow for autonomous management have resulted in varying school operating models that provide increased leadership authority and decision-making power to principals and local schools. Changes in legislation across states and school district policies have resulted in the creation of locally managed, autonomous, independent, charter, and contract schools. Commonly known as the Portfolio Model, this hybrid collection of schools has become a favored district-level strategy for managing schools within large urban school districts (Hill, 2006). The Portfolio Model grants principals and others greater control over

their school environments as they seek to meet the needs of their communities (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). In the Portfolio Model where several different school operating models exist in one district, autonomy is used to help foster innovation. According to Donnelly (2015), the viability and sustainability of schools through parent choice leads to increases in student-centered learning and partnerships with local communities to improve school performance. Thus, autonomy is important because it grants principals the authority to make market driven decisions on how to best run their schools. Typically, this would be evident in how principals recruit students, hire faculty, create specialty programs, and market initiatives directly competing with other schools.

Varying degrees of principal autonomy can be found in large urban cities like Chicago, Houston, New York, and Philadelphia. According to Gobby (2016), the benefits of principal autonomy become the freedom, confidence, and courage leaders experience to identify challenges, implement changes, and forge a path of school improvement.

The granting of principal autonomy varies between states and local school districts. When earned, principal autonomy is awarded as a result of meeting clearly defined performance goals and achievement metrics. This is viewed as a form of principal recognition. Alternatively, autonomy is sometimes employed by districts as a school improvement strategy. This is done by providing principals greater authority in exchange for increased accountability with the intent of bringing about a desired change (Hill, 2006). This is viewed as a reform initiative. According to Hill (2013), levels of autonomy can range between basic and advanced depending on the depth of freedoms given to principals to control spending, time, hiring, student groupings, professional development, compensation, work assignments, and purchasing of academic support services.

The most common freedoms granted to autonomous principals involve decision making authority over accountability, personnel management, resource allocation, and instructional programming. Understanding how principal autonomy is granted in public, charter, and private schools is important. In traditional public schools, autonomy is generally granted to principals based on their ability to achieve state and districts mandates (Adamowski et al., 2007; Gawlik, 2008). Such is the case in Chicago. With charter and private schools, autonomy is granted within operating models that allow principals to meet the immediate needs of their students and communities (Adamowski et al., 2007; Gawlik, 2008).

School Districts Using Autonomy

Based on state laws, district policies, and school operating agreements, autonomy can look very different. School districts using autonomy can be grouped into three types: district-school autonomous relationships, partner-led autonomous authority, and partner-run autonomy (Kim, Field, & Hassel, 2019). In all three models school governance is defined by state or district policies that establish frameworks for schools to be granted autonomy. School based autonomies allow for critical functions of management and operations such as staffing, academic programming, budget, and operations to shift to local schools. Schools gain decision-making authority by exercising flexibility from traditional district polices. Design and implementation differ as districts grant decision-making authority in varying degrees.

District-run autonomous schools operate with waivers from certain district policies or state laws, but school leaders and staff remain as traditional employees (Kim, Field, & Hassel, 2019). An example of this are the Denver Innovation Schools. Since 2008 select schools have requested waivers to meet the needs of their students. Applications are reviewed and approved by the district

and the state board of education annually. In 2018 the Denver Public Schools had forty-nine Innovation Schools.

Partner-led autonomy permit schools to operate as independent organizations with some district oversight (Kim, Field, & Hassel, 2019). Independent organizations manage critical operations along with the hiring of school leaders. Shifts in governance do not occur as school staff remain employees of the district and collective bargaining rights remain in effect. The Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) in Chicago is an example. Since 2006 AUSL has managed low performing schools in Chicago. Through individual school management agreements with CPS, AUSL exercises staffing and curricular autonomies but adheres to the district's collective bargaining agreements. In 2018 AUSL operated thirty-one schools in Chicago.

Partner-run autonomy involves the transfer of full school governance and authority to partner organizations separate from the district (Kim, Field, & Hassel, 2019). Partner organizations have full authority to hire school leaders and all staff. Also, the partner organizations become the actual employers. The Renaissance Schools of Camden is an example of a school partner organization with full academic and personnel autonomy. New Jersey's Urban Hope Act of 2012 permitted districts with a high percentage of low-performing schools to authorize contracts with nonprofit school operators to open new schools under ten-year renewable agreements. These schools are exempt from the district's collective bargaining agreements. In 2018 three charter management organizations operated eleven schools in Camden.

PROCESS

This phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of Chicago's independent school principals along with their perceptions of autonomy and its impact on their leadership. By studying the phenomenon of autonomy along with collecting the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of independent principals, the shared experiences of these unique school leaders can be understood by others. The findings of this study are intended to be used by CPS and other large urban school districts to better understand autonomy and its impact on leadership, school improvement, and job satisfaction.

RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH DESIGN

Phenomenology was selected to examine the lived experiences of Chicago's independent principals because it is both a philosophical and methodological approach that allowed for the exploration of deeper meaning and understanding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Studying conscious structures and experiences from the first-person point of view allowed for the interpretation and understanding of events (Smith, et al., 2009). This is based on a belief that the experiences of an individual can be accessible to others through intimate dialogue (Smith, et al., 2009). Using this methodology, independent principals were recorded as they shared their unique experiences. This allowed me to gather data and to deeply understand and connect with their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about autonomy.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used because of the descriptive orientation involved in seeking understanding (Smith et al., 2009). This approach allowed for deep descriptive data to be collected about participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Using individual interviews, I captured information on the thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and experiences of being an independent principal. This allowed me to understand and describe the lived experiences of Chicago's independent principals. From the participants' perspective, I recorded information about autonomy and models of school management. Likewise, I explored how autonomy shaped the leadership, professional, and personal experiences of independent principals. The premise for using phenomenology was to capture and analyze participants' unique experiences in search of emerging commonalities thus describing the essence of being an independent principal.

RESEARCH SETTING

In seeking to extract meaning from the lived experiences of Chicago's independent principals, the use of phenomenology aligned with the scope of this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Five independent principals were selected for the study. Interviews were recorded and used to capture the perceptions and experiences of participants as they shared insights into their experiences with autonomy. Analyzing interview responses resulted in the emergence of patterns and meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

Using a phenomenological approach, the data was analyzed in three stages: bracketing, reduction, and structural description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I set aside my experiences with autonomy and looked for understandings as if experiencing them for the first time. Through

multiple readings of the interview transcripts, reduction was used to concentrate information and data into themes. Lastly, fundamental textual and structural descriptions were organized into unifying statements that described the essences of the whole phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

In selecting a research setting, it was essential to consider and record important aspects of the context and environment in which the study occurred (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This study exclusively utilized interviews to gather data. Being mindful of time and privacy, interviews were limited to one hour and conducted in a private location as determined by each participant. A handheld electronic device was used to record the interviews.

SOURCES OF DATA

In conducting this phenomenological study, it was important to select participants who have experience with the phenomenon being explored and could articulate their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Five independent principals with rich experiences and insights on being autonomous were recruited to participate in this study. By collecting and analyzing their experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, an in-depth understanding of principal autonomy emerged (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Participant profiles were created using background information such as education and professional experiences. Demographically, participants were required to be current independent principals with one or more years in the ISP program. Participants' perceptual knowledge of the phenomenon was important because interviews were the primary method for collecting data. Care was taken to select subjects that were comfortable with providing open and honest descriptions of their experiences, decisions, attitudes, thoughts, motivations, and feelings.

Theoretical information was collected through a detailed review of literature on principal autonomy. This provided me with insight for interpreting, analyzing and synthesizing the collected data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Limited research exists on Chicago's independent principals and the impact autonomy has on educational outcomes for students. More research is needed to understand the daily challenges of independent principals and the complex learning organizations they lead where everything is their responsibility.

Studies conducted by the CSSR and CPEF were examined and used to understand the historical perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of CPS principals. Interviews were used as the primary data collection technique. Potential participants were identified using the ISP program list as published by the CPS Department of Principal Quality. Also, participants were required to have a minimum of one full year of autonomy. Charter and contract independent principals were excluded from consideration.

DATA COLLECTIONS METHODS

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by me. Thick descriptions were organized and used to generate themes that explained the essence of being an independent principal and how autonomy was perceived. A semi-structured interview format was used. An interview guide with a predetermined list of questions was used to facilitate the interviews. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Also, field notes were logged and used to help deepen the interview transcripts. The field notes included nonverbal behaviors, moods, and descriptions of the environment. Each interview lasted one hour and was conducted in a private location based on

each participant's preference. Effort was made to make participants feel comfortable. I encouraged them to be open and honest in their responses.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

I bracketed my own biases by describing in writing my experiences with principal autonomy and my opinions. This was an attempt to set aside my thoughts as an independent school principal and focus wholly on the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ability to look at and hear experiences for the first time was necessary to assure validity.

Phenomenological reduction was used to reduce participants' stories, experiences, and responses into authentic essences. Isolating the phenomenon of being an independent school principal required multiple readings of the transcripts. Significant statements were extracted in a process called horizontalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These statements were grouped together into meaningful themes. Structural descriptions were then drafted. Lastly, a composite description of being an independent school principal was written to emphasize the "what" and the "why" of the phenomenon and to answer the research questions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the plan and design of this study, ethical considerations were made to ensure participants' rights were recognized and protected. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest a progression of ethical deliberations be conducted prior and during the research, data collection, data analysis, and findings. Conducting ethical deliberations enabled me to anticipate and address issues of fairness, equity, recruitment, site selection, and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The purpose of this study was communicated to potential participants using email and in-person conversations. Research participants were asked for verbal and written consents including to audio record the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Participation was strictly voluntary and withdrawal from the study at any time was presented as an option.

Data collected from the research study is confidential. The recordings were only used to answer the research questions. Audio recordings were transcribed in writing. There were no foreseeable risks to the participants. All the data has been stored in a locked file cabinet and is accessible only to me. All electronic files have been secured on a computer using password protection and encryption. All recordings were destroyed at the conclusion of this study. Transcripts are being kept for possible future use for a period of five years.

Every effort was made to build trust and convey the extent of any anticipated disruptions to the participants. I used my own experiences as a CPS independent principal to establish rapport, trust, and validity. Throughout the study, participants were encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification. Likewise, participants were informed that at any time during the interview they could decline answering any question, request the audio recording to cease, or end the interview. During the interviews, I avoided asking leading questions, making personal impressions, and disclosing any sensitive information (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

ISSUES OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is defined as a researcher's thoroughness in analyzing a phenomenon through evidence collection, thick descriptions, and triangulated analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Since qualitative researchers do not use instruments with established metrics, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are used to establish trustworthiness (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Credibility refers to the truth and accuracy of the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In this study, researcher bias was addressed using field notes. Thick descriptions were recorded during the interviews. Member checks were used as a validation technique. According to Ravitch & Carl (2016), it is important to actively engage with and respond to participants' critiques, comments, interpretations, and changes. Each participant received a typed transcript of their interview for review via email and mail. Participants were asked to read, edit, and add to the transcripts. Also, they were asked to reflect on the accuracy of their transcripts in capturing their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. Lastly, they were asked if there was anything the transcripts did not capture. Follow-up conversations were held to discuss the transcripts and to ask additional questions.

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Detailed information on the collection and reasoning of the data analysis has been provided. Field notes and transcripts are available for reviewing by other researchers.

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality exercised by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The goal of confirmability is to acknowledge the biases and prejudices that may impact the data and to be transparent in how these are addressed in the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Reflexivity, dialogic engagement, and reflective discourse were used to challenge researcher assumptions. Also, justifications for decisions and data analysis were recorded.

Transferability seeks to demonstrate the applicability of a research study's findings to other contexts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Purposeful sampling was used to identify and recruit study participants. Thick descriptions were recorded capturing settings, experiences, and perceptions.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

A limitation of this study was the small number of participants. With nearly one-hundred independent principals in Chicago, more participants may have yielded additional insights into the ISP program experience. Likewise, the participants' experiences varied depending on their previous relationships with district and network supervisory personnel. Both elementary and high school principals were included in the purposeful sample. Though they described their work differently, their diverse experiences were informative to the study. Also, the ISP program being in existence for only three years limited the amount of exposure and time independent principals had to experiencing the phenomenon.

The delimitations of my study were CPS principals in the ISP program working in traditional schools. A traditional school is defined as an elementary, middle, or high school that operates under direct CPS and network oversight. Contract and charter school principals were excluded. Moreover, study participants were required to have been in the ISP program for a minimum of one year.

This study is intended to contribute to the body of knowledge and research on principal autonomy. Understanding the unique experiences of Chicago's independent principals and how they perceive autonomy helps shape future leadership development and policy around urban school decentralization. As transformational school leadership continues to emerge as an important part of school reform, figuring out ways to retain and motivate principals are essential to the work. Freeing school principals from overwhelming bureaucratic burdens and pressures may be the start to reshaping the job so that it aligns with the core values of leadership, teaching, learning, and service.

APPLICATION

OUTCOMES

This study explored the experiences of Chicago's independent school principals and the essence of their autonomy. Potential study candidates were identified from the list of independent principals as published by the CPS Department of Principal Quality (see Appendix A). Purposeful sampling was used to identify candidates with varying demographic characteristics: school geographic location, school size, school type, years of administrative experience, and year of entry into the ISP program. Recruitment emails along with the study's information sheet were sent to twelve independent principals (see Appendices B and C). Follow-up phone calls were made to study candidates to explain the research study, answer questions, and determine suitability. Ultimately, five independent principals were selected to participate in the study.

Participants from both elementary and high schools were selected for the study. Likewise, participants represented different CPS networks and neighborhoods. Also, they had different ISP program entry years. This was important because it helped capture the depth of autonomy as experienced by both veteran and newer independent principals. Pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality. Table 1 provides a visual representation of the study participants' demographic information. The interview dates, times, locations, and formats were mutually agreed upon and scheduled separately with each study participant.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Study Participants

Name	Type of School	Grades Served	Location of School	Age	Years of Experience in Education	Years of Experience as a Chicago Principal	School Year of Entry into the ISP
Mark	Elementary	PreK-8	Southwest	46	22	13	SY2016
Gina	Elementary	PreK-8	Northwest	52	30	16	SY2017
Mitchell	Elementary	PreK-8	North	50	27	8	SY2018
Thomas	High School	9-12	Northwest	52	28	16	SY2018
James	Elementary	9-12	South	42	27	8	SY2019

An interview guide with questions organized into topics was created and used to establish rapport and to generate responses to open-ended questions (see Appendix D). The goal during the interviews was to have independent principals reconstruct and share their autonomous experiences (Seidman, 2013). Study participants were emailed the interview guide in advance of their scheduled times. This was done to promote trust and transparency between interviewer and study participants. It was anticipated that study participants would want to review the questions in advance. Participants reported that doing so made them feel comfortable in giving honest and deep responses. A flexible interview format was used to ask questions and to facilitate conversations with the participants (Bailey, 2018). Field notes were recorded and used to capture nonverbal behaviors such as environment and mood. Each interview lasted approximately one

hour and was recorded using a handheld audio device. Pseudonyms were used in the transcripts to protect the confidentiality of the study participants.

Member checks were employed as a participation validation technique. This allowed study participants to speak and respond to the representations of their realities as captured during the interviews transcripts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Each participant received a typed transcript of their own interview via email and mail. Participants were asked to read, edit, and add to their interview transcripts and to reflect on the accuracy of the content. Follow-up phone calls to the participants were made seeking their feedback, revisions, and any additional information. Participants offered feedback and validated their transcripts. No new information was shared rather participants clarified language and provided some additional details to their responses. Information from the member checks were added to the transcripts.

During the process of reading and marking the transcripts, informative passages were labeled using words and symbols. The process of noting what is interesting and important is called coding (Seidman, 2013). Codes were assigned through an interpretative process that involved multiple readings, repeated coding, and focused coding (Bailey, 2018). In looking for relationships between the codes the following categories emerged: accountability, autonomy, compliance, decision-making, differentiation, flexibility, independence, innovation, instructional leadership, isolation, networking, operational demands, prestige, professional development, student-centered, stressful, and time.

A thematic analysis conducted on the data yielded emerging themes that were recorded. According to Bailey, a thematic analysis helps to answer the how, why, what, where, who, and when types of questions that are of interest to field researchers while still providing a naturalistic and holistic understanding of the study participants (2018). Both conceptual and overarching themes emerged and were recorded as such.

Conceptual themes are defined as reoccurring topics and events discussed by study participants (Bailey, 2018). Overarching themes are unifying threads and underlying insights that capture the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Baily, 2018). Participant responses were used to construct conceptual themes that answered the research questions. Ultimately, seven overarching themes emerged that embodied and exemplified the essence of the autonomy experienced by Chicago's independent school principals. These overarching themes are listed as follows and are explained in greater detail in the findings:

1. Independent principals are deeply mindful of their schools' unique needs;
 2. Independent principals are free from a network structure of oversight and accountability that is fragmented, stressful, and consumes valuable leadership time;
 3. Independent principals feel valued and rewarded for their demonstrated success;
 4. Independent principals feel isolated as part of the ISP program;
 5. Independent principals use their autonomy to select curricula, assessments, and professional development that work best for their schools;
 6. Independent principals have more authority and time to be collaborative, creative, and resourceful in meeting the needs of their students, teachers, and communities;
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7. Independent principals give generously of their time and talents by mentoring new principals and supporting district initiatives.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of CPS principals that apply for and are awarded autonomy through the ISP program?

In Chicago, public schools are grouped together by location and school type into geographic networks. These groups of schools are commonly referred to as networks. There are seventeen networks in CPS. Each network is supervised by a Network Chief and staffed by instructional and support personnel. Along with participating in network meetings and initiatives, principals are required to submit their annual school budgets and professional development plans to their Network Chiefs for approval.

Along with managing and monitoring the performance of their schools, Network Chiefs evaluate principals using the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders. Network Chiefs are required to measure principal quality and success against ambitious student growth and achievement metrics as set forth by the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) and adjusted annually for each school (Principal Evaluation, 2016). The SQRP is a five-tiered performance system based on a broad range of indicators of success, including, but not limited to, student test score performance, student academic growth, closing of achievement gaps, school culture and climate, attendance, graduation, and preparation for post-graduation success (SQRP, 2019). The purpose of the SQRP is to communicate to parents and community members about the academic success of individual schools and the district as a whole. SQRP results are used by CPS to recognize high achieving and high growth schools and to identify best practices. Also, SQRP provides a framework for schools to use for goal-setting purposes. Lastly, CPS and Network Chiefs use SQRP results to make decisions on principal and school sanctions including principal dismissal (SQRP, 2019).

CPS principals are required to adhere to numerous district compliance requirements and mandates. Each network is staffed by a team of specialists that support schools and are charged with leading improvement initiatives. Network teams are typically composed of a Parent Liaison, Instructional Support Leaders, a Bilingual Specialist, Diverse Learner Administrators, and a Data Specialist. Network Chiefs conduct rigorous formal and informal observations of principals using complex evaluation matrices and require extensive evidence to be shared during performance review sessions. Also, Network Chiefs and their teams schedule many meetings during school days and throughout the year. Typically, Network Chiefs tightly manage their principals to ensure schools participate in and remain in compliance with district mandates and professional development requirements.

All five study participants spoke at length about being free from network oversight and compliance. They spoke favorably about having autonomy to choose professional development and school improvement initiatives that aligned with the needs of their schools. Also, they commented on how their experiences and schools were beyond the levels typically demonstrated at the network. They felt the professional development offerings at their networks would hold them and their schools back. A common theme that emerged in response to this question was that

participants became deeply mindful of their schools' needs and sought to create systems and programs that responded to their students, teachers, parents, and communities.

Theme: Independent principals are deeply mindful of their schools' unique needs.

Independent principals reported being deeply aware of their schools' needs and are closely involved with operational, instructional, and community matters. They spoke of working closely and collaboratively with constituency groups on all types of affairs. They worked hard to anticipate and quickly resolve problems at the school level. They held themselves accountable for their schools' SQRP ratings. They shared credit for successes and accepted blame for failures. They spoke in detail about their schools' SQRP reports along with plans for continued growth and improvements. During the summer when preliminary results were released to principals, they analyzed the data and shared it with their school communities. Immediately, they began consulting with their instructional leadership teams to review Continuous Improvement Work Plans (CIWP) and to identify areas for improvement. During his interview Mark shared how listening to teachers' ideas and tailoring instruction for students was fundamental to his school's success.

I just feel like we've been able to create such an impactful environment for our students because of our decision to limit testing. We've been able to tailor instruction for the students and listen to our teachers' needs and make decisions that will benefit their students and them as educators. I think we always try to do what's best for the kids and I think sometimes when you don't have the autonomy you lose some of that.

As an independent principal, Gina described herself as a stronger and better instructional leader free to make decisions in the best interest of her students. She spoke confidently about having the authority to make important decisions.

I now can be a true leader in my school without having the district necessarily mandating every little thing that needs to happen. I can make decisions based on each kid kind of like differentiated for each kid's needs whether it be curriculum, whether it be special programming or any services. I can lead that path for my school and the community.

James stated that being independent allowed him to focus on transforming teaching and learning at his school and doing whatever works best for his students, faculty, and school community. He stated his work went beyond meeting SQRP metrics. Rather he chose to focus on his students and to create impactful opportunities for high school, college and beyond.

It's incredible and a privilege to be a principal. Truly. It's a lot of stress, a lot of work. You've got to be committed to this being part of your life is the way I look at it. I'm a proud principal of a school that underwent a tremendous transformation in just eight years. It's about being academically high performing, but my role demands that I focus on priorities that align to the best interests of my students and their growth and development academically and socially. I also want to always make sure we're increasing student exposure and expanding options beyond the

basics of meeting test scores but truly opening doors and creating opportunities through selective enrollment and having the long view of what our goal is.

Thomas expressed relief with being released from network compliance mandates that contributed very little to his school's improvement. As an independent principal he reported using his autonomy to prioritize school improvement efforts as identified by his constituents. He shared that his school's CIWP reflects a mission, strategies, goals, and milestones as developed by him and his team in the best interest of his students and teachers.

What allows you to attain ISP status I believe are certain professional habits that tie into like accountability, and you having a proven track record of being able to establish and maintain systems and structures with integrity while getting results. As a network principal I was always told, you will do these two things and you can pick one for yourself. Those two things usually had nothing to do with my school. It was usually the network chief who made all the schools in the network do those two things, that way they could easily check on those two things because they chose them and they know how to get the data and it had nothing to do with whether or not you actually need to do that at your school. Whereas now, we can build our CIWP with the community, with the teachers, and work on things we actually need to work on in our buildings.

Similarly, Mitchell described the differences between network and independent principals as having the autonomy to choose to participate in educational initiatives that work best for his school without feeling pressure from a Network Chief.

I feel like in CPS there's a lot of oversight from central office and often they are the ones setting what the work is going to be and the principal's job is just kind of carrying it out. Whereas in ISP schools there is no push down from someone else saying like well we're going to focus on small groups this year so you have to focus on small groups too. It's more this is your building and what does your school need and focus on that.

Research Question 2: What beliefs do independent principals have about traditional versus autonomous models of management?

Reflecting on their past experiences in a network, study participants reported that meetings, compliance mandates, and the format for evaluating principals consumed valuable time that could have been better used to lead teaching and learning efforts at their schools. Likewise, participants perceived traditional principals as having less time to collaborate with constituency groups, interact with students, and meet with instructional teams to guide the work of teaching and learning. Participants reported having the autonomy and the time to be instructional leaders and to do their jobs well. Participants reported that most ISP program meetings and district initiatives were optional. Also, they reported being less consumed with unnecessary communications and compliance tasks.

As part of the ISP program, independent principals are given the privilege and opportunity to be trained as Illinois State Board of Education approved principal evaluators. Doing so allows independent principals to partner with peers to conduct formal and informal observations and to collaboratively complete each other's evaluation ratings. Study participants reported being satisfied with peer reviews. They perceived peer evaluations to be less stressful and more focused on reflection, growth, and leadership development and not about accountability. Participants shared and sought to participate in peer evaluations as a way to collaborate with colleagues, share ideas, and help each other with the work. A common theme that emerged was that the network structure for school oversight and principal accountability is ineffective.

Theme: Independent principals are free from a network structure of oversight and accountability that is fragmented, stressful, and consumes valuable leadership time.

Gina described network professional development offerings as being mandatory and limited. She stated that Network Chiefs assumed schools had similar needs and that principals were required to take back the information to their schools. This caused her cynicism and resentment. She organized professional development efforts at her school that paralleled the network offerings but went deeper to address gaps identified by her. Eventually, the offerings and supports were not appealing enough to keep her in the network. Likewise, she reported the negativity of the other principals was too much to handle.

Given past experiences within the network, things weren't differentiated for us. So, our needs as a school in terms of professional development were not met. It was kind of a one size fits all type of support you know whether you fit it or not. What was provided that's what you were expected to do. I'll be honest with you it wears on you when you go to a meeting with a room full of principals and they're not of the same mindset that you are, a lot of negativity, it brings you down. Also, I felt that I have enough connections that I know who to go to for HR issues, budget issues, political issues, if you will. So, I felt it was time for me to move on.

Mitchell reflected on his experience as a traditional principal in a network as always feeling pressured to complete compliance tasks and other mandates that detracted from his primary work as instructional leader. He reported that being independent freed him up to focus more on the needs of his students. He shared how the love of teaching and learning has returned to his school as the academic and emotion needs of his students are put first.

The amount of pressure I felt was constant. Always feeling like there was some type of compliance, always some due date, always testing, there was always something that was going on that was taking me away from instruction and where it was just not allowing for this authentic school community to occur because I was constantly having to complete some sort of assignment from the district. While now I focus on one assessment versus focusing on ten and it allows my teachers to really focus on instruction based off students' needs you know based off that one assessment. This allows us to focus on other initiatives that we do care about so I've seen that love of educating and caring about students but then the level of stress

is always there on both ends but I think it's a different type of pressure that is happening now.

Mark expressed frustration and disappointment at having to deal with network mandates and requirements that he viewed as unambitious and disconnected from his school's professional development priorities. Likewise, he expressed frustration and disappointment with being micromanaged as part of a network.

The nitpicking about things like my PD agendas, "how come you don't have my stuff on your PD agenda?" Those sorts of things and then at the same time we were trying to move towards personalized learning and implementing a NGLC grant. At the same time, I was having the Chief tell me to do something that was totally contradicting that approach. So that really pushed me to what, oh ISP wonderful. That will get me out of the network.

Thomas shared his frustration with the revolving door of Network Chiefs and the changing mandates they brought with them. He expressed losing confidence in CPS senior leadership and their ability to meaningfully fill these roles.

It seems like every Network Chief will come in with some token initiative that they feel is going to transform their schools and that they expect everybody to be doing it and it differs with everybody. It could be unit planning, it could be data meetings, it could be MTSS. They are making these decisions without necessarily knowing or understanding the needs of each school. They've got a lot of different schools I mean sometimes 25 to 40 schools or something up there.

Similarly, James shared his frustrations with the many Network Chiefs he worked with over the years which caused him to want to leave CPS because of the constant changes and pressure. He reported that the ISP program gave him options and hope to remain a principal in CPS.

For me being ISP is freedom from network meetings. I think that is probably the biggest one. While I was in a network, I want to say in my first nine or ten years as a principal I had about nine bosses. So just having different chiefs and having to learn their styles and in the middle of one year I was assigned to another network and it was clear that the chief did not like me and I've been told since then that yes he didn't like me. But really, I mean I started looking for other jobs. I really didn't like the pressure.

Questions 3: How do independent principals perceive their autonomy?

Study participants perceived their ISP status as a reward for demonstrated success as measured by SQRP results, LSC evaluations, and their commitment to the district. They perceived the recognition to be highly regarded by other principals and educators and a source of pride for themselves and their schools. Participants reported the ISP designation is something other principals aspire towards and that independence validates their accomplishments. Participants

were humble and shied away from taking all the credit for their ISP designations. They acknowledged their teachers and school communities for their contributions. They reported using the ISP designation often as a motivator and badge of honor at their schools.

Participants reported initially celebrating and boasting of their new designations but quickly realized that the work continues and that they needed to prove themselves worthy of their new autonomies. Participants described it as not a time to stop but a time to work harder. Although they initially described independence as a motivational boost, participants were quick to get back to the realities of their work and the daily grind of keeping their schools running well. A common theme that emerged was that independent principals felt rewarded for their demonstrated success.

Theme: Independent School Principals feel valued and rewarded for their demonstrated success.

Gina shared her view that the ISP designation was granted to her as a reward for her years of service and commitment to CPS. She acknowledged that autonomy keeps principals motivated to continue the work. Also, she stated that experienced principals should be treated differently than novice principals. She shared that the recognition was a result of her school's performance as measured by the SQRP and she was proud of herself and the efforts of her students, teachers, and families.

My personal feelings are that it is great and good for the people that deserve it and I think it is wonderful in terms of if in any job you've been in your job 15 years you shouldn't have to do the same thing that a first-year person is doing it doesn't make any sense it's not a good use of anyone's time. So, I think it's absolutely wonderful for that and I think it makes people feel valued and recognized when their school has done really well in that's so important to just keep motivation up and for all those reasons it's wonderful.

Gina continued to talk about how the ISP designation was perceived by her teachers as a reward which afforded them autonomy too. She believed that her school earned the right to reduce testing and to pave their own school improvement pathway but reminds teachers not to take the freedoms for granted.

I think a lot of people appreciate the fact that we're an independent school because if they've taught at another school or remember what it was like to be part of a network then they appreciate it. They can think back and remember what it is like to be at a school that has so much testing so many more compliance requirements just so much more just thrown at them that they must tackle. I think if they haven't been anywhere else, they sometimes forget that piece and they don't appreciate what they have. I always say, "Do you want to be the people who decide our destiny, or do you want other outsiders to come in and tell us what to do?" So, I think they really like the freedom and autonomy too.

James shared that the designation is perceived as prestigious and something for others to aspire to. He used the word jealous to make mention of principals who look forward to escaping the network structure.

I think they perceive it as a little prestigious. They are a little jealous if they are not in an independent school you have so much more freedom than a regular school you can do so much more or you can make more of your own choices and I think they see it as a level of prestige and something to aspire to receive down the line at some point.

Mitchell's perception of the ISP designation was that it validated his decisions, judgement, and leadership. He reported leveraging his autonomy when reminding his LSC and teachers that the designation was earned by him and not the school. He believed that being an independent principal made him more trustworthy. He stated the recognition was not important to him but felt his knowledge, experience, and expertise has been affirmed by CPS.

The reason we do it is to avoid the crazy Network Chief, right? If I can have more autonomy, I'm going to jump at the chance to do that. I think a lot of principals would... I chose to apply to ISP more for the fact that I thought that most of my decision I was making on my own anyway, and having that designation basically tells the world "hey, the district trusts me enough that I don't have somebody who is necessarily micromanaging every single move."... I often reference it with my LSC. It's one of those things where I do let the LSC know that this is my designation, not that of the school, but I have it because of some of the things that I've been able to prove in my work here. So, when I ask you guys to trust me on some of these things, it mirrors the trust the district has in me as well.... If you ask me from a sentimental perspective, it is a recognition from the district. I mean, I don't want that in any way shape or form at all. So, for me it's that initial moment where it was granted at this point it goes back to being business as usual.

Mitchell went on to say that at the time he applied for the ISP program he was doing innovative work and that it was a validation of what he was already doing.

Yeah, so I wrote up these essays and had to demonstrate that you've done stuff that other principals haven't. Then you actually get interviewed by ISP principals and the principals that interviewed me were both very innovative. So that conversation with them was actually awesome because we were all on the same wavelength. But, you know you are ISP before you are ISP right? I mean, you know who those people are who are pushing the envelope already and you are now being invited to join them.

Thomas Rojas reflected on his designation as a being a reward for his many years of service and commitment to the district. He made mention during the interview that he believed the ISP program was being used by CPS as a retention strategy to keep principals who are contemplating leaving the district. He reported feeling honored to be selected as an independent principal and often bragged about it to others. He went on to admit that the euphoria of being an independent principal had worn off and that the work continued as normal.

I look at this as a reward because they actually called and said "Hey, we don't want you leave the district. We'd like you to stay. What can we do for you? What

would make you happy?” I asked to be ISP and they said that’s not a problem. Just fill out the paperwork. I think it has changed through the years to be honest with you. I would say at the very beginning I felt it was an honor. Like “Whoa, look at me, I’m ISP”. You remember in the beginning they put peoples’ pictures in the newspaper. It was a big deal. At the time I thought it was so prestigious and now it’s like no big deal.

Mark humbly shared his thoughts on being an independent principal by simply stating that it allowed him to focus more on his work at the school. He reported that being independent allowed him to avoid the political realm of the job of not having to balance network and district mandated with what he found to be important for his school. He went on to describe how his teachers’ shared in the autonomy. He did state his LSC members had no real knowledge or opinion of the designation.

So, I think we have a fair amount of autonomy already. To me, this just gives you a bit of status but I think the main thing for me is just not having to balance the politics and what do I feel is the best for us at this moment in time. I know in some places it’s a bigger deal than here. I don’t think my Local School Council really knows or cares too much about that. I think my teachers do. I try to share my autonomy with them as much as possible.

Study participants expressed missing the camaraderie that comes with working in a traditional network structure. Despite stating that network meetings were a waste of valuable time, participants missed seeing, speaking, and connecting with other principals on a regular basis. Also, they appreciated the sharing of information and communications that came with having a direct supervisor. Two of the participants spoke highly of their Network Chiefs but because they feared district uncertainty and changes they decided to pursue ISP status. A common theme that emerged was autonomy’s unintended consequence of isolation.

It was evident that feelings of isolation and working alone were troubling to study participants. They spoke at length about the lonely feelings they experienced and gave examples of difficult situations where they sought out assistance and no one was available to help them. Participants reported having come to the realization that accepting autonomy cost them access to available resources and help from others. Further, participants believed that most Network Chiefs did not appreciate or celebrate the ISP program and instead viewed it as a threat to their leadership and work. It was said that if successful principals leave to join the ISP program then Network Chiefs lose the high flying schools that could help lead the work of their networks.

Some Network Chief have been known to use isolation and lack of support as a way to discourage principals from applying to the ISP program. When an independent principal does go to a network for assistance they are often turned away and told they are no longer part of the network. It appears that principals applying for the ISP program carefully consider pros, cons, and various scenarios to determine if autonomy is right for them and their schools. Based on the findings, it appeared that animosity exists between Network Chiefs and the ISP program. Participants reported they often weigh the value of their freedoms against the benefits and supports of being in a network.

Theme: Independent principals feel isolated as part of the ISP program.

Study participants reported being in charge of their schools' visions and blueprints for change and improvement. They worked hard to develop intentional pathways for achieving SQRP success in a way the district could never understand. During her interview Gina talked about feeling conflicted about her ISP designation. She spoke of her readiness to be an independent principal and welcomed the freedoms that came with it. Conversely, she expressed feeling isolated from her network peers and the assistance they provided. She spoke fondly of being mentored by her former Network Chief but decided to apply to become an independent principal because she feared the constant change in network and district leadership. Most of all she disliked not having anyone as a direct supervisor that could offer her guidance, support, or back-up with challenging situations. She shared an event that was very stressful and that compelled her to find the courage to move forward. Also, she questioned if it was fair or right to go from many supports to none overnight.

What independent school principal means to me is feeling isolated. I go back and forth on this. I so much enjoyed my time in the network, especially under the previous chief. She was supportive of me, pushed me. I feel like I'm the principal today because of my time working with her. I just did not want to deal with another chief, if that makes sense. I felt like I had gone through Fellows. I feel like I didn't really need that prescribed PD. The long and short of it is it's not so prestigious. You feel a little bit out of the loop at time. You don't have constant reminders. I'll give you a good example. Literally the day after it was announced that I was ISP I had a serious situation at my school. We went on lockdown and it was on the news, it was horrible. Everyone was safe. It was completely blown out of proportion, one of those things. So, I ended up holding a parent meeting here that Friday. I reached out to my network for help and was told "Good luck with that!" If this had happened a week before the chief would have been by my side. When you have 300 people in the auditorium needing answers, it's a little unnerving but I got through it. It reinforced why I was ready, if you will. When I say lonely and isolated it's because it is. There's really no one. There have been times even this year where I've reached out for help and I get no reply.

Similarly, James jokingly commented that the ISP program should be renamed the isolated school principals program. He seemed content that being independent resulted in not having access to network supports. Conversely, he seemed happy knowing he spends more time leading the work at his school. He mentioned missing the opportunity to network with other colleagues on a monthly basis. He reported losing contact with colleagues because he focused more of his attention and time on the needs of his school. He went on to say that because of this he started to lose interest in what was happening in other schools and what other principals are doing.

I hear very often from other ISP colleagues and see this for myself that at certain points of the year there is a degree of isolation. So, the I in ISP should actually mean isolated school principal. Prior to being ISP, you have formal network gatherings every single month that bring colleagues to the table and there's common ground in what everyone is being asked to do through initiatives and it's

an opportunity to just vent, share ideas, and just connect with people. On the ISP side, there's one or two meetings a year and they're spaced very far apart and because everyone's kind of working to manage their own schools, I don't think it creates any more freedom on the calendar. I think it actually creates more investment in the work because you are managing so many things trying to build leadership in your school... You start thinking less and less about what's going on in other schools because you're pre-occupied with what's going on at yours exclusively. To clarify, it's not true isolation you're just isolated from other principal colleagues.

Thomas talked about the lack of support personnel available to assist with difficult parent matters or complaints. Independent principals are required to resolve matters at the local level. No supports are provided by the district to do so. Complaints to CPS get immediately routed back to independent principals for resolution. Like it or not, independent principals must resolve difficult matters on their own. Most participants spoke how they missed the support provided by their networks.

We just had the ISP meeting. They told us how too many parents call down there and that it's getting kind of crazy. We had a FACE [Family and Community Engagement Specialist] person the first year of ISP and that was great because she handled these issues. It's helpful because every once in a while you get a parent that you've done everything and they are just like, "I'm not happy. I want to jump above you." Having a network will limit some of that jumping because maybe they can manage it.... If I was part of a network, the network chief would have called and said, "Hey, what's happening?" and then handle it... I wish I still had this support it would save a lot of time and aggravation.

In referencing the same ISP meeting, Mark mentioned a comment that made him feel unsupported. Meeting attendees were told if independent principals needed support then to consider returning to their networks. He seemed to think that district expectations are that independent principals should not have complaints filed against them and if they do, they must navigate and resolve matters on their own. Also, he felt this is unfair as problems do occur even with the best principals and in the best schools.

So, at the last ISP gathering they talked about this need for supports and other things. We were clearly told that if we needed supports and other things that it could be arranged to return back to the network. I thought that was odd. Maybe whoever is managing ISPs is overwhelmed and needs support.

Like the other study participants, Mitchell talked about being isolated from his peers and wanting more time to collaborate with other independent principals. He stated that he often contemplates ways to enhance the ISP program and to increase outreach and cooperation. He shared how offering support and assistance to new principals helped him fill the void of not feeling connected to others.

The worst part of being ISP is that if you don't go out of your way to make those connections then you don't have them at all. That's a big problem. I have ideas about how to change that and I would love to restructure the ISP program to allow for that... I've decided to go a different route more like what can I do to influence my particular people by officially and unofficially mentoring new principals. We establish really good working relationships and it is helpful to both of us... I want to make sure that they learn through my headaches as opposed to your own as much as possible because those headaches are going to be large enough so I hope I can help others.

Research Question 4: How do independent principals use their autonomy?

Study participants reported that autonomy from a traditional network structure alleviated the pressure to adopt district prescribed instructional materials and assessment tools. Consequently, the findings indicated that independent principals select curricula, assessments, and professional development that align strongly with their schools' CIWPs as written by them and in consultation with their school communities. Independent principals understand the necessary pathways for making changes and improvements at their schools. Along with this, participants reported having the freedom and authority to allocate funds to support initiatives as prioritized by their local leadership teams. Not having to fund district or network mandates is a considerable cost savings.

Participants reported having used their autonomy to reduce student testing and to reject many of the districts' recommended quarterly assessments. Participants expressed their teachers and parents feel this is a tremendous privileged as the district's over reliance on testing is a concern for many educators and parents. Participants believed that students directly benefit from maximum teaching and learning. A common theme that emerged is that independent principals use their autonomy to align curricula and professional development as identified by their CIWPs.

Theme: Independent principals use their autonomy to select curricula, assessments, and professional development that work best for their schools.

During her interview, Gina shared how she selected social-emotional learning as a priority for her school and made curriculum and professional development decisions that improved the climate and culture in her school building. Typically, this not an area measured by the SQRP but she felt it was important to promote teaching and learning as a holistic experience.

I would say the biggest thing that I've been really proud of this year is just how much they improved from last year just seeing the growth of social-emotional learning. It's just kind of exploded in our school from bringing in our SEL partners and bringing the training for our teachers and staff to setting up Lutheran Social Services and having a counselor in our school helps students on a deeper level who need support they can't get on the outside. And really I feel like even just from having the Second Step school-wide and focusing on the teacher self-care I feel like from two years ago to now there's more life within the building and more

happy faces and I feel like the culture has shifted in a very positive way that makes me very happy.

During his interview Mark reported that his decision to limit district testing freed up time and allowed him and others to focus on making his school a special place that puts students at the core of the work. He expressed the importance of not just focusing on SQRP metrics but on how to nurture and educate the whole child.

I feel like what we have here is something special and I feel like we are not just a neighborhood school we have so much more and I just think that our kids come in smiling and they come happy our teachers are doing innovative instruction and we offer so much to our kids and it's not always testing, testing, testing. We allow for them to become individuals, become young adults, and help them grow from Pre-K all the way through 8th and as a school we can take on I think more initiatives and have that freedom to do so without being kind of bogged down by the network mandates that could happen.

Mitchell talked about the mismatch of priorities between networks and schools. He no longer balances network mandates versus the needs of his school. Being independent empowered him to put his students, teachers, and school community first.

I would say that a frustration in a network is that sometimes I think the network might set a priority area and say this year we're really going to focus on this thing and you may be sitting there as the leader of your building feeling like that's not really relevant to my school, my school doesn't need that right now, my school really needs this, my staff needs this other thing, and that is where I want to take my work. But you feel that you have to do this network thing and to do it well and to show your chief that you're doing it. When really it's just for compliance sake rather than doing it because it's actually meaningful for your school. So, I think in terms of ISP when you have that autonomy, again you're better able to choose those efforts yourself rather than having them pushed down from someone who might not know your building.

James shared how autonomy afforded him freedom from budgetary and professional development oversight. He stated that it was important for independent principals to identify opportunities to work collaboratively with others and to get the work done well. Likewise, he expressed the importance of developing a pathway to address school improvement and communicating that out to your school community.

There is clearly more autonomy and less oversight which is definitely a plus in relation to budget and professional development so that you're making the decisions that are best suited for your school so long as you're identifying the right gaps and really working to build leadership within your building to really make things continue to operate without there being instructional coaches and chiefs kind of pointing you in a certain direction, which is often a misdirection.

Thomas added that he used his autonomy to focus on his entire school community. He encouraged teachers to share in his autonomy which helped foster greater ownership of the work, decision making, and trust between him and his faculty. Findings indicated that independent principals spread their autonomy throughout their schools because they believe that everyone benefits from being able to forge their own unique paths.

I spend a lot of time communicating with stakeholders, including parents, community, and students. But really making sure that we embrace our core values, that we're on point with our goals each year academically, providing really good professional development for staff, whether it's coming from me or from others, making sure kids are safe that kind of thing. Honestly, I find that teachers are the ones that understand the benefits of ISP status best. They appreciate it. What I've found is that it builds greater trust between myself and those stakeholders. So, there is a sense of greater control over decision making. I feel there's a greater spirit of collaboration really that's emerged in my school because they understand that there's no external pressure now and demands that are coming our way.

Question 5: How does autonomy impact the leadership of independent principals?

Study participants reported that being released from network management and supervision was a major benefit of the ISP program. Also, they believed that independent principals were expected to operate autonomously. Study participants reported autonomy from their networks allowed them more time and authority to be creative and flexible in selecting, funding and executing school improvement plans. They reported forging unique school improvement pathways without interference from their networks. Another benefit reported by participants was being able to quickly and efficiently execute budgetary and staffing transactions without review. A common theme that emerged was that independent principals exercised their autonomous privileges in efficient ways that resulted in considerable time savings which allowed them to spend more time on doing their jobs well.

Theme: Independent principals have more authority and time to be collaborative, creative, and resourceful in meeting the needs of their students, teachers, and parents.

During his interview, Thomas talked about how autonomy afforded him the authority to make decisions in the best interest of his school either by adopting or declining district initiatives as he saw fit. Likewise, he shared that budgetary decisions and transactions were expedited by the district which enabled him to make quick changes as needed to support the work at his school.

In terms of getting things done it is fantastic you are not mandated to be outside of the building just once or twice where there are mandated principal meetings. We are kind of left alone to be here at the school to provide oversight and direction at the school as needed. Also, my budget transactions get approved immediately. I don't have to wait for somebody to sign-off on those and buckets, we can yank the money right out of our buckets without having to go to anybody and use the money to buy things like more computers for kids, books, and training for staff. In terms

of autonomy and in terms of decision-making stuff, like for example CPS wants to roll-out a curriculum, I can say I'm not doing that and being ISP I don't have to.

He continued to discuss less oversight allowed him to be creative in scheduling and making decision in the best interest of his students without fear of failure.

Students need X number of minutes in this content but you're trying to be creative in scheduling where you give students more choice and that's going to conflict with this mandate or this compliance component but you are trying to do right by kids so you're trying to be creative. All the kind of elements that people talk about best practices and student choice but afraid to try. Being ISP you're kind of free from the constraints of you know but then you really try and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work but at least you try to be creative and provide different offerings and experiences for kids.

Similarly, Gina reported having the authority to decline compliance measures from the network or district and instead choosing what was most important for her school. She spoke positively of having more time to invest in school improvement efforts.

Many years of being successful in a school and having a school that has had lots of success can become very mundane and can drag you down as part of the network. I think you become kind of tired of things just taking up all your time. So, I think rather than having to spend time on those compliance tasks and those things that are just done purely for the sake of getting them done you're more freed up to do other things... I would say being more authentic with initiatives in your school as they come up like you can kind of take the time to really invest in school improvement efforts that are coming up organically or maybe ideas your staff came up with on their own and it might not be the best or exact time that the spreadsheet was due but it's now and we can really dig into it and you can devote more time to those things that matter rather than having to do them kind of like on someone else's timeline.

In reflecting on his leadership, Mitchell expressed how his approach to handling complaints and problems changed. Without a Network Chief to consult with, he developed confidence in his ability to understand a problem and resolve issues as they occur.

I think personally ISP makes you stronger, if that makes sense. I use the term a lot, be responsive and not reactive. I think if I had a chief, I'd be not relying on my own skills sometimes and going to them for advice. It really makes you be reflective. I use that term a lot. I believe it's made me a much more reflective leader. It's made me better about working with my own teams.

As part of a network, Mark struggled to balance district mandates with his goal of implementing personalized learning at his school. Becoming an independent principal allowed him to confidently focus on initiatives that mattered to him such as developing a web tool to track

his students' academic growth and performance. He described taking three years to plan and launch a suite of innovative tools and trackers used to support his teachers and students.

One thing I struggled with before I became independent was, we recently won a NGLC grant and we were pushing personalized learning through the school and figuring out ways how we can make sure our top kids keep getting pushed. How can we make sure our kids at the lowest end are getting what they need and get kids to kind of create their own learning paths? As a principal, you try to involve your teachers somehow in the decision-making process so they have that buy-in and are willing to implement it. It's easier to do that on the ground level than having a network come in and tell you what you need to be doing.

He went on to discuss the web tool he designed and launched for his students and how he is using it. Also, he shared how he was proud to be sharing it with other principals.

We identified about 90 students and we started tracking them in January. To do that we created a website that allows you to generate reports. Through this NGLC grant and other independent fundraising I've been able to hire a developer for the last three years. This developer has created a website where other principals can use downloads from Dashboard and Aspen and then upload into our site to create the same reports that I've been using to produce results for my students.

Being free from a direct supervisor, James found himself working closer with his LSC which oversees school governance. Becoming independent gave him freedom from compliance mandates and allowed him to focus on matters that were important to his school community. This is an important finding because often times the mandates of Network Chiefs and the desires of LSCs are in conflict with each other. Participants reported being stuck in the middle and having to negotiate common ground in the best interest of their schools.

My LSC and I are making decisions together as opposed to having a Network Chief come in and tell us what to do, which I have experienced quite a bit. I don't really like that, but I think that's one of the biggest pieces. I can actually work and engage the parents and the community members to make real decision that are going to impact our school.

Findings indicated that independent principals committed themselves to giving back to the district. Study participants expressed having strong organizational leadership skills and a desire to assist other colleagues. Being freed from time consuming network meetings allowed them to realize their desire to assist other colleagues. Participants reported having committed themselves to giving back to the district. These accounts align with the second objective of the ISP program which is to expand impact through meaningful leadership capacities and innovative collaboration (Department of Principal Quality, 2017). This was evident in the responses of all five participants.

Study participants expressed both a sense of duty and responsibility for wanting to give back to CPS. They reported offering their talents, experiences, and knowledge to support and mentor future school leaders. Also, they acknowledged that it was expected that independent principals contribute to the district by finding ways to be part of initiatives and other work.

Participants perceived themselves as role models for other administrators and as success stories be shared by the district.

Study participants each pursued individual areas of interest when joining district committees or leading initiatives. They spoke of mentoring resident and new principals. The common theme that emerged is that independent principals enthusiastically found ways to give back to the district in hopes of making positive changes and improvements.

Theme: Independent principals give generously of their time and talents to mentor new principals and support district initiatives.

James Warren talked about his contributions as an independent principal. His way of giving back was to participate in the CPS principal eligibility process. In addition, he led a yearlong professional learning community for assistant principal aspiring to become principals.

So right now, I'm the lead assessor for the eligibility department of principal quality. So, I'm also an assessor as well serving in that dual capacity. I'm also leading a PLC for the fund for aspiring assistant principals who are looking to take the next step in their trajectory to land a principalship. So, in terms of doing my part to give back, that would be what I'm involved in at least in the last couple of years.

Mitchell talked about his participation in CPS senior leadership committee work as being unproductive and a waste of his time. He expressed feeling that independent principals are invited to join committees that often produce no results. He stated political capital and courage are lacking. He reported that many of the initiatives he has been a part of gave the appearance that something was being worked on because district leaders and independent principals were meeting but nothing was accomplished. Thus, he decided to mentor new to role principals holding budget and other working sessions to teach them how to navigate the district and to become confident, strategic, and successful school leaders

The district tries to give ISP principals different roles. It almost seems sometimes that the stuff is made up for us, and it drives me crazy. I hate going to those meeting because I know that most of the time it's just to have conversations that never will impact anything and sometimes I get myself in trouble with that type of stuff, because I'm like, "We're not going to do anything with this, so why are we spending so much time talking about changing the residency policy? Or change X, Y, and Z? We don't do anything with it." So, we spend countless hours on this stuff. So, I decided to go a little different route, which is what can I do to influence my particular people. What can I do? So, I started mentoring new principals. I developed really good relationships and it has been very helpful for them and me.

Gina shared how she spends a lot of time during the summer leading CPS mentoring for new principals. Also, she sat on several important district committees. Being freed from network meetings and compliance mandates provided her time to contribute to the district. She expressed much of her work supported aspiring and new leaders. She felt that her knowledge and

experience was valuable to the district. She often made herself available to work on district policy committees in hopes of improving matters for everyone.

I've enjoyed my work as a lead mentor. I feel it has helped mentors and mentees. I really liked the work around building the New Principal Institute and the work it is really important... I have participated in the alumni committees. You know I'm on the grading policy right now too. I was on the Compensation Committee. I was on the Special Education committee for the district. So, I would say I've replaced the time that I used to devote to doing PLCs and network meetings and now replaced it with doing stuff for the district.

Thomas talked about his time as a Lead Mentor working with new to role high school principals. He found it a good use of his time and enjoyed it very much but did admit the additional work done by independent principal could be time consuming and draining.

I've been involved a lot with the Lead Mentor program and find it very purposeful and enjoyable. I guess I could do more, but it takes up a lot of time. I think we have done a nice job building-out systems and supports for new principals. We try to support them with professional development, budget, and scheduling. We try to give them ideas for the work they are doing in their schools.

In meeting ISP program expectations, Mark discussed his school grant and how other principals and school teams visited his school and met with him. He expressed a desire to use his work with personalized learning and the NGLC grant to motivate changes and improvements in other high poverty schools like his. He used his status as an independent principal to make his school an unofficial demonstration site for other educators to visit and take back ideas to their schools.

As a NGLC grant winner I have partnered with two charter schools and five CPS schools and we get together on a fairly regular basis. I help lead a lot of the work for the grant and help facilitate a lot of sharing of ideas. Yearly, we get about 60 visitors that come through the school from around the district and county. Also, I have helped organize conferences for participating school.

Collectively, study participants spoke of the ISP program as having benefited themselves and their students, teachers, and school communities. Autonomy freed participants from network interference or unwanted mandates so they could be more responsive to the needs of their schools. Also, participants identified pathways for school improvement and pursued them with vigor and passion. Evidence indicates that participants took ownership for their work and held themselves accountable for their achievements and failures.

The findings of this study suggest that independent principals feel empowered to make decisions and implement changes that in turn enhance teaching and learning at their schools without fear of failure. Also, independent principals welcome the extra time to work in their buildings and be hands-on and creative. They view the designation favorably and appreciate the recognition, status, and opportunities that come with it. Also, independent principals give back more time to the district than they save but they feel excited about the importance and purpose of

the work. Like all principals, independent principals work hard and are tired at the end of a long day but they feel fortunate to not have the added pressures of an unreasonable supervisor and unnecessary compliance mandates hanging over their heads.

IMPLICATIONS

Being a CPS principal is an extremely challenging and at times a frustrating job. The job is described as overwhelming and takes a physical, emotional, and psychological toll on all. Even the best principals sometimes feel exhausted and disillusioned. Typically, new principals leave early in their tenure unable to cope with the pressures of handling countless essential demands and responsibilities. Principals that choose to remain often become resilient and creative in navigating large bureaucratic systems. Eventually, they figure out what is necessary to successfully get the work done. The ISP program acknowledges this fact and grants autonomy to deserving principals to continue doing the work without interference. Study participants expressed feeling less stressed as part of the ISP programs. Findings of this study were consistent with Freedman's (2002) assertion that decentralized school governance helps reduce principal stress.

According to Portin (2000), effective urban principals need strong working skills and the authority to navigate complex systems and to strategically allocate limited resources to support the needs of their students, families, teachers, and communities. Findings of this study revealed that independent principals use their autonomy to become strong operational and organizational leaders.

Urban school districts across America view principals as the nucleus for improving their schools. Findings of this study suggest that independent principals work hard at reaching school accountability goals and operate with a sense of urgency to improve instruction. This is consistent with the claim by Kimball and Sirotnik (2000) that principal autonomy creates conditions for impactful teaching and learning to occur in schools.

The findings of this study suggest that the ISP program provides independent principals freedom and authority to be innovative and creative in enhancing teaching and learning at their schools without fearing failure. According to Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1993), independence at the local level makes those closest to the delivery of services more responsible and accepting of the results. This is especially true of Chicago's independent principals because they relinquish their network supports for autonomy. By doing so, independent principals take on more accountability. During their interviews, independent principals shared ambitious plans for improving teaching and learning while explicitly stating how important it was for their teachers and LSCs to share in the work and accept accountability too.

Findings of this study suggest that independent principals seek to improve their schools by inspiring those working with them to commit to higher levels of dedication, energy, and moral purpose. This is what Leithwood and Menzies (1998) describe as a high efficacy for school success. Shifting from district and network oversight to autonomous school governance requires principals to partner with teachers and constituents as important sources for identifying problems and setting goals (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Principal autonomy is a contributing factor in creating conditions for high efficacy to succeed. Consequently, the ISP program has the effect of serving both as a principal reward and as a school improvement strategy (Ouchi, 2006).

Study participants described their autonomy as freedom from district and network compliance. Autonomy enabled them to spend more time on local school improvement efforts

that directly impacted student outcomes. This finding is consistent with what Murphy and Hallinger (1992) describe as shifting from manager to leader. Under autonomous models of school governance, successful principals change their thinking to be less compliance driven and more innovative. Findings of this study revealed that independent principals viewed themselves as catalysts for innovation and desired to create shared visions, redesign systems, develop people, and build strong relationships with their communities. Independent principals spend considerable time charting school improvement efforts and ensuring quality teaching and learning occurs for their students. According to Gawlik (2008), the transformational power of principals can be unleashed when given freedom, resources, support mechanisms, and time allowing them to implement plans as they see fit.

In seeking to spark school innovation, close the achievement gap, and increase graduation rates, Gawlik (2008) emphasizes the importance of transformational leadership and the need for principals to be granted organizational flexibility. Similarly, Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) describe visionary leaders as successfully building positive school climate and interpreting policies to facilitate effective implementation. Also, mobilizing teachers and community members to set and achieve school improvement targets is important (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Findings of this study suggest that independent principals are careful to strike a balance between being innovators of learning and performance driven managers. Free from network oversight, compliance, and accountability, independent principals focus on collaboratively developing CIWPs and adopting customized initiatives that result in improved outcomes for their students and as measured by SQRP metrics. Independent principals use autonomy to minimize disruptions in their schools by limiting external mandates and focusing on maximizing teaching and learning time.

According to Gobby (2016), autonomy's greatest impact occurs when principals are granted the freedom, confidence, and courage to identify challenges, implement changes, and forge pathways for school improvement. This was evident in how study participants described deviating from district testing, professional development, and compliance mandates. Findings of this study indicate that independent principals create systems and make decisions to meet the unique needs of their schools. They look to develop within their schools leadership teams to formulate recommendations and make decisions. Also, independent principals identify building talent to help lead instructional and professional development initiatives within their schools. These initiatives are accompanied by local budgetary decisions that shift discretionary funds to where they are needed most. Likewise, independent principals vigorously seek grants and other external funding sources to supplement their school budgets.

Study participants spoke extensively about ISP program autonomies such as testing, allocating resources, and instructional programming. Likewise, they talked about their involvement with creating unique schedules, conducting peer principal evaluations, hiring, adopting initiatives that aligned with their CIWPs, shifting money as needed, and selecting curricula. The findings of this study were consistent with the recommendations made by Adamowski et al. (2007) that called for autonomous principals to be granted authority over accountability, personnel management, resource allocation, and instructional programming.

According to Kim et al. (2019), school autonomy can be grouped into three types: district-school autonomous partnerships, partner-led autonomous authority, and partner-run autonomy. The ISP program is classified as a district-run autonomous operating model where school governance is defined by district policies with an established framework for principal autonomy. Although described as the least autonomous of the three operating models, Chicago's independent

principals are granted significant decision-making authority and flexibility as compared to traditional district principals. Study participants expressed possessing significant power compared to their days working under a Network Chief.

The objectives of the ISP program are to reward high-performing principals with increased autonomy, expand their impact through meaningful leadership and innovative collaboration, and to build systems and structures to support increased autonomy (Department of Principal Quality, 2017). Study participants perceived the ISP designation as a reward and appreciated being given the opportunity to participate. According to Snodgrass (2018), autonomy does not make the job easier rather it is celebrated and used to improve teaching and learning. Participants felt they deserved the designation because of their commitment to the district and their demonstrated success. Some spoke of the ISP program as the next step in their professional career while others spoke of using it to escape the scrutiny of a Network Chief where compliance measures ran contrary to school innovation. All of the study participants expressed serving on district committees and working with aspiring or new principals. The voices and experiences of independent principals are sought out by CPS leadership. Likewise, independent principals are the first ones to be invited to join a committee, lead an initiative, or offer help.

As CPS leadership seeks to reverse a harmful trend that at its peak saw 60% of principals leave their roles within five years, the findings of this study suggest independent principals are happier as a result of their autonomy and less likely to unexpectedly leave their schools. These findings are consistent with assertions by Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) that autonomous principals experience greater job satisfaction and are less likely to leave their schools prematurely. Likewise, Rangel (2018) states when principals are satisfied they stay longer in their roles. Although not listed as an objective, the ISP program should consider adding principal retention to its list of goals. Findings of this study suggest autonomy is a significant factor in keeping talented principals from leaving CPS.

Despite the positive effects of autonomy, findings indicate that independent principals feel isolated and alone. Study participants spoke of needing help at times but not having anyone to support them. This is an unintended consequence of the ISP program. This issue requires closer examination and should be addressed by district leadership before admitting more principals into the program. I will discuss this further in the recommendations section of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout their interviews, study participants shared many interesting ideas for increasing their autonomy and improving the ISP program experience. It is evident that independent principals are committed to the objectives of the program and make themselves available to CPS senior leadership. Also, independent principals want all of Chicago's schools to offer ambitious teaching and learning and to be regarded as high quality institutions. Based on the research findings I propose the following recommendations for enhancing the autonomous experience of Chicago's independent principals. The recommendations are listed below with explanations to follow:

- Annually provide independent principals with a suite of options to choose from that include budget, network, and management supports;

- Allow Network Chiefs to recruit independent principals to join their networks as mentors and professional learning community leaders to improve the quality and variety of professional development offerings;
- Expand peer principal evaluations to include all principals as a way to promote collaboration between traditional and independent principals;
- Provide independent principals the authority to make changes to the academic calendar and instructional day to better serve their school communities;
- Provide independent principals with additional school funding and greater spending flexibility to support innovation in their schools;
- Annually survey independent principals to gather information and feedback on their experiences;
- Annually publish a list of independent principals along with their contact information, areas of expertise, participation in district initiatives, and professional accomplishments to support administrators seeking guidance and help;
- Develop a career pathway for promoting independent principals into Network Chief and other CPS senior leadership roles.

Recommendation 1: Annually provide independent principals with a suite of options to choose from that include budget, network, and management supports.

Study participants spoke of feeling isolated and unsupported as part of the ISP program especially during emergencies. Although none of the principals voiced a desire to rejoin their networks, they did express needing assistance and support at times with difficult matters. Providing a menu of support options at the start of each school year for independent principals to select from could help resolve this problem. Options for support could include such services as a Management Support Director, a Data Strategist, a Budget Specialist, and an Instructional Support Leader. Based on demand, existing network or district personnel would offer their services to independent principals. A memorandum of understanding would be drafted outlining the responsibilities and commitments of both parties. This would come at no cost to independent principals as these services are normally available to all principals.

Also, independent principals should be provided the option of joining a network. Since each network has a different annual professional development focus releasing this information prior to the start of the school year and allowing independent principals to choose could help alleviate feelings of isolation. Independent principals would not be connected to a specific geographic network or chief but rather would have the option to attend any one of the seventeen network based professional development offerings. CPS would need to release this information during the summer and allow time for independent principals to choose. In return, independent principals would be asked to assist Network Chiefs with mentoring new and struggling principals and assistant principals. This would allow independent principals to serve as resources to Network Chiefs as opposed to having their skills and talents removed because of the ISP program.

Recommendation 2: Allow Network Chiefs to recruit independent principals to join their networks as mentors and professional learning community leaders to improve the quality and variety of professional development offerings.

Independent principals often pilot, facilitate, and lead many CPS initiatives. Permitting Network Chiefs to recruit independent principals to join their networks as mentors for new principals and assistant principals could alleviate the lack of cooperation that exists between networks and the ISP program. This would help distribute ISP program leadership across the district and increase leadership capacity. Likewise, independent principals would be available to assist with the planning and delivery of professional development and make their school teams available to support others. Also, independent principals could conduct peer principals evaluations too helping to reduce the workload of Network Chiefs. This unique partnership would make independent principals feel connected to other colleagues and allow them to access the resources and supports offered by a network. Independent principals that would like to be affiliated with a district would be able to do so in a meaningful way and those who would rather not would not be required to participate.

Recommendation 3: Expand peer principal evaluations to include all principals as a way to promote collaboration between traditional and independent principals.

Under the Illinois' Performance Evaluation Reform Act, principals are evaluated using a standards-based system that includes student growth indicators as well as professional practice ratings (Principal Evaluation, 2016). Network Chiefs and independent principals undergo the same training and complete the same certification requirements to become eligible to evaluate school principals. Typically, independent principals rotate conducting peer evaluations amongst each other. Although study participants reported enjoying this privilege they felt the time could be better served if able to partner with network principals too. They believed the process would be beneficial in forging stronger relationships between independent and network principals. Likewise, this would have the effect of increasing the leadership capacity of network principals throughout the district too.

Recommendation 4: Provide independent principals the authority to make changes to the academic calendar and instructional day to better serve their school communities.

Study participants reported feeling constrained by district policies that impede ambitious instructional schedules. Independent principals want the authority to create unique school calendars, teaching assignments, and student schedules. Findings indicate that independent principals feel limited by collective bargaining agreements that require all schools to operate using outdated and restrictive work rules. Independent principals should be able to negotiate and navigate labor agreements with their instructional leadership teams, local schools councils, and community groups to improve outcomes for students.

Recommendation 5: Provide independent principals with additional school funding and greater spending flexibility to support innovation in their schools.

The ISP program is perceived as a cost savings measure for CPS since independent principals do not use or have access to the services of network support personnel and other resources. Likewise, they receive little to no compensation for their committee work and assistance with district initiatives. Study participants reported seeking extra funding through grants and external fundraising to help launch ideas and ambitious plans at their schools. Study findings indicate that independent principals want CPS to direct ISP program cost savings back into their school budgets. The additional money would be used to fund teacher professional development, technology upgrades, and support services for at-risk youth.

Recommendation 6: Annually survey independent principals to gather information and feedback on their experiences.

During their interviews, study participants offered many ideas for streamlining district structures and leveraging greater autonomy. Unfortunately, study findings suggest independent principals perceive senior district leadership as either too busy or uninterested in listening to their ideas, suggestions, or recommendations. Independent principals want to be positive change agents for CPS. They are motivated and capable of generating ideas and leading initiatives to improve teaching, learning, professional development, leadership training, parent engagement, spending, and other important functions of CPS. Surveying independent principals on their experiences and thoughts could help unleash the power of the ISP program and help bring the ideas of independent principals into fruition. At the very least, they will feel heard.

Recommendation 7: Annually publish a list of independent principals along with their contact information, areas of expertise, participation in district initiatives, and professional accomplishments to support administrators seeking guidance and help.

Study participants expressed being satisfied with their ISP designations. Recipient names, areas of expertise, and participation in district initiatives should be published annually and disseminated throughout CPS. This will have the effect of reintroducing independent principals to their colleagues by sharing information on their talents and accomplishments with other administrators seeking guidance, expertise, or help. Doing this will reenergize independent principals to feel proud of their ISP designations and to continue contributing to the mission and vision of CPS. This would serve to reinforce the uniqueness of the designation while giving other principals something to strive for. Independent principals should be considered a clearinghouse of talent, knowledge, and experience.

Recommendation 8: Develop a career pathway for promoting independent principals into Network Chief and other CPS senior leadership roles.

Independent principals are highly trained educators that possess extensive leadership experience and institutional knowledge. During their interviews, study participants shared that

prior to the ISP program they completed executive leadership training. Furthermore, findings indicate that most independent principals have completed one or more executive leadership programs such as the Chicago Principals Fellowship, the Cahn Fellows Program, Courageous Principals, and the Executive Principal Program. Independent principals have the training and experience to successfully navigate complex learning organizations like CPS and have unique perspectives on how autonomy can be used as a school improvement strategy, a reward for high performing administrators, and as an employee retention approach.

Study participants talked about how all CPS principals could benefit from having earned autonomy granted to them. Independent principals want to coach colleagues in leveraging the power of autonomy to support improvements in teaching, learning, and leadership. Promoting independent principals into network and district leadership roles will help with changing the existing negative perceptions and feelings that principals have towards their superiors. Findings suggest that many CPS principals feel detached from district leadership and feel misunderstood, unsupported, unappreciated, and disrespected.

Encouraging independent principals to seek career advancement opportunities in CPS and to apply their transformational leadership skills to lead and inspire other principals could be very powerful and help address the current void in district leadership. This will help improve the retention of district administrators too. A robust leadership pathway for independent principals will keep them in CPS longer and will demonstrate to others that their work matters. This will have a powerful and lasting impact throughout the district. If done with fidelity, promoting independent principals into network leadership roles will positively impact CPS over time.

CONCLUSIONS

One could only wonder how schools would operate and function without principals. The constant departure of Chicago's school leaders jeopardizes reform efforts to increase student outcomes and to improve schools. Autonomy is not new but when framed with the express purpose of rewarding, empowering, and retaining principals it is something powerful to be watched.

After conducting this study, capturing the lived experiences of CPS principals that apply for and are awarded autonomy through the ISP program was complex. What clearly emerged were three positive outcomes. Autonomy benefits principals, school communities, and CPS. Autonomy fosters independence, freedom, and self-reliance within principals. Also, autonomy has a powerful impact on how work gets done in schools.

Principals' perceptions of traditional versus autonomous models of management indicated overwhelming support and appreciation for their independence designations. They appreciated and enjoyed being recognized for demonstrated success over time. Likewise, CPS leaders and traditional principals perceived autonomy as a reward and something to strive for. The ISP program is highly regarded and sought after by principals. It is important for CPS to continue supporting independent principals in strengthening their successes. Also, district leadership should share insights and discoveries with other urban school districts seeking to introduce autonomy to their principals and compare outcomes of different autonomous leadership models.

Recommendations for future research are to increase the number of study participants and to utilize surveys and focus groups to capture deeper insights into the essence of being an independent principal. I would include independent charter and contract principals in the study too. Likewise, I would seek to speak with former independent principals that returned to a network, accepted a district leadership role, and left CPS. Comparing and contrasting their responses and perspectives could yield new information and additional understandings of how schools and networks coexist together. Also, I would further research autonomous and independent principal models in other urban districts and compare the findings of this study.

Ideas for consideration are to revisit the process used to award independence and autonomy to Chicago's principals. Rather than being reserved for a select group of recipients, autonomy should be considered a professional ladder for all principals. With time and demonstrated success, principals should automatically be awarded autonomy. This may result in increasing overall principal satisfaction, employee retention, student achievement, and school performance in CPS. Also, I encourage CPS to spend more time and resources on preparing, mentoring, and supporting new to role and struggling administrators.

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APPENDIX A



Independent School Principals (ISP)

Principal	School	ES OR HS	SY Joined
Ruth Walsh	ADDAMS	ES	2017
Mira Weber	AGASSIZ	ES	2017
Anna Pavichevich	AMUNDSEN HS	HS	2018
Otis Lee Dunson III	ARMSTRONG G	ES	2020
Takeshi White-James	AVALON PARK	ES	2019
Carmen Navarro	AZUELA	ES	2018
Patricia Brekke	BACK OF THE YARDS HS	HS	2018
Estuardo Mazin	BARRY	ES	2018
Stacy Stewart	BELMONT-CRAGIN	ES	2019
Naomi Nakayama	BUDLONG	ES	2019
Catherine Plocher	BURLEY	ES	2017
Richard Morris	BURROUGHS	ES	2018
Danielle Porch	CALDWELL	ES	2019
Stephen Harden	CAMERON	ES	2019
Clariza Dominicci	CAMRAS	ES	2020
Jeremy Feiwell	CARDENAS	ES	2018
Docilla Pollard	CARNEGIE	ES	2017
Javier Arriola-Lopez	CARSON	ES	2016
Eileen Scanlan	CASELL	ES	2019
Joseph Peila	CHAPPELL	ES	2019
Barton Dassinger	CHAVEZ	ES	2016
William Hook	CHICAGO AGRICULTURE HS	HS	2017

Natasha Buckner	CLARK ES	ES	2019
Charles Anderson	CLARK HS	HS	2020
Eileen Marie Considine	COLUMBIA EXPLORERS	ES	2020
Wendy Oleksy	COLUMBUS	ES	2018
Gregory Alan Zurawski	COONLEY	ES	2020
Carol Devens-Falk	CORKERY	ES	2019
Carolyn Eggert	DEVRY HS	HS	2018
Kathleen Hagstrom	DISNEY	ES	2016
Beulah McLoyd	DYETT ARTS HS	HS	2018
Nneka Gunn	EBERHART	ES	2019
Serena Peterson	EBINGER	ES	2017
Judith Sauri	EDWARDS	ES	2017
Kurt Jones	FRANKLIN	ES	2018
Michelle Willis	GILLESPIE	ES	2018
Pamela Brandt	GOUDY	ES	2019
Kiltae Kim	GUNSAULUS	ES	2017
Jacqueline Hearn	HEFFERAN	ES	2019
Adam Stich	HITCH	ES	2020
Konstantinos Patsiopoulos	HOLDEN	ES	2019
Charles Smith	INFINITY HS	HS	2019
Paul Powers	JONES HS	HS	2016
Juan Ocon	JUAREZ HS	HS	2016
Suzanne Mzenis-Luzzi	JUNGMAN	ES	2019
Dawn Caetta	KINZIE	ES	2016
Lawanda Bishop	KIPLING	ES	2019
Paul Schissler	LARA	ES	2020
Lauren Albani	LASALLE II	ES	2017
Lisa Epstein	LEE	ES	2017
Angela Sims	LENART	ES	2016
Mark Armendariz	LINCOLN	ES	2019

Michael Boraz	LINCOLN PARK HS	HS	2016
Lillian Lazu	LITTLE VILLAGE	ES	2018
Jay Thompson	LLOYD	ES	2016
July Cyrwus	LORCA	ES	2018
Erin Galfer	MARINE LEADERSHIP AT AMES HS	HS	2018
Jose Juan Torres	MARSH	ES	2020
Joseph Shoffner	MCCLELLAN	ES	2018
Jo Easterling-Hood	MCDOWELL	ES	2017
Karime Asaf	MOOS	ES	2016
Catherine Reidy	MOUNT GREENWOOD	ES	2017
Manuel Adrianzen	NOBEL	ES	2017
Kelly Mest	NORTHSIDE PREP HS	HS	2019
Angelica Herrera-Vest	ORTIZ DE DOMINGUEZ	ES	2020
Jennifer K. Dixon	PALMER	ES	2020
Gerardo Trujillo	PASTEUR	ES	2018
Timothy Devine	PAYTON HS	HS	2016
Brigitte Swenson	PEACE AND EDUCATION HS	HS	2017
Okab Hassan	PECK	ES	2016
Lorainne Zaimi	PEIRCE	ES	2020
Ferdinand Wipachit	PHOENIX MILITARY HS	HS	2019
Rigo Hernandez	PICKARD	ES	2019
Nathan Manaen	RAVENSWOOD	ES	2019
Michael Biela	RICKOVER MILITARY HS	HS	2018
Christine Jabbari	ROGERS	ES	2019
Lourdes Jimenez	SALAZAR	ES	2019
Christine Munns	SAUGANASH	ES	2019
John O'Connell	SHERIDAN	ES	2019
Alice Buzanis	SHERWOOD	ES	2019
Deborah Clark	SKINNER	ES	2016
Jerry Travlos	SMYSER	ES	2017
Tara Shelton	SOUTH LOOP	ES	2016

Maria McManus	STEM	ES	2019
Olimpia Bahena	TALCOTT	ES	2017
Jacqueline Medina	TALMAN	ES	2017
MaryKay Richardson	THOMAS	ES	2018
Efren Toledo	THORP O	ES	2018
Gerardo Arriaga	TONTI	ES	2017
Sabrina Boone Jackson	TURNER-DREW	ES	2020
Renee Mackin	VON LINNE	ES	2018
Ekaterini Panagakis	WACKER	ES	2018
Rashid Shabbazz	WADSWORTH	ES	2019
Karen Anderson	WARD J	ES	2018
Antigoni Lambrinides	WEST RIDGE	ES	2019
Joyce Kenner	YOUNG HS	HS	2016
Ruth Garcia	ZAPATA	ES	2016
Joshua Long	SOUTHSIDE HS	HS	2018

APPENDIX B

Dear Independent School Principal,

My name is Jerry Travlos and I am currently pursuing a doctorate in Education Leadership at DePaul University. For my culminating Capstone Project I am conducting a study of Chicago's independent school principals.

I am conducting this research study because I am seeking to learn more about the lived experiences of independent school principals and how they perceive their autonomies along with how it impacts their leadership.

I am seeking your participation because you are a K-12 independent principal with this designation for one or more years.

I will be conducting one-on-one interviews of independent school principals as they share their experiences. Collecting thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and experiences will help me understand how autonomy shapes leadership. I will analyze participants' unique experiences in search of emerging commonalities to describe the essence of being an independent school principal.

I am seeking five independent school principals to interview. Interviews are expected to last approximately one hour. A handheld device will be used to audio record the interviews.

If you are interested in being considered and agree to be in this study, please respond to this email at jtravlos@mail.depaul.edu or call me at (773) 391-2047. If selected, I will call you to schedule the interview and arrange for a location that is convenient for you.

Research data collected from participants will be in an identifiable way and then de-identified later. Pseudonyms will be used. There is no risk to you.

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later after you begin the study.

As a thank you, you will be given a \$10 Starbucks Coffee Gift Card for participating in the study.

For your reference, I am attaching an Information Sheet for Participation.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this study please contact me, Jerry Travlos at 773-391-2047 or by email at jtravlos@mail.depaul.edu.

Sincerely,

Jerry Travlos
Doctoral Candidate
DePaul University

APPENDIX C

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHICAGO'S INDEPENDENT SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Principal Investigator:

Jerry Travlos
College of Education
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Institution:

DePaul University, USA

Faculty Advisor:

Barbara Reickhoff, PhD
Associate Dean & Associate Professor Leadership, Language, and Curriculum

I am conducting this research study because I am trying to learn more about the lived experiences of Chicago's independent school principals along with their perceptions of autonomy and its impact on their leadership.

I am asking you to be in this research study because you are a K-12 Chicago Public School principal with an independent designation for one or more years.

I am conducting this study by audio recording interviews of independent principals as they share their experiences. Collecting thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and experiences will help me understand how autonomy shapes the leadership of independent principals. I will analyze participants' unique experiences in search of emerging commonalities to describe the essence of being an independent principal.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview.

The interview will include questions about your leadership and experiences. I will also collect some personal information about you such as years of service. I will consider your preference when selecting a site to conduct the interview such as your office, my office, or public library. A semi-structured interview format with a pre-determined list of questions will be used. Field notes will be taken to record nonverbal behaviors, moods, and the environment. A handheld device will be used to audio record the interview.

If there is a question you do not want to answer, you may skip it. The study should take about one hour to complete.

Research data collected from you will be in an identifiable way and then de-identified later.

When you first give me your information it will be linked to you with a pseudonym and I will have a key that tells me who that pseudonym belongs to. So for a period of time, it is possible to link

this information to you. However, I have put some protections in place, such as storing the information in a secured computer under password protection and with encrypted files. After the study is completed (in about 6 months), I will remove all the identifiers and make the data de-identified. All recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study but transcripts will be kept for future use for a period of five years in the de-identified way. There is no risk to you should someone gain access to the data.

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later after you begin the study.

You can withdraw your participation at any time, by contacting Jerry Travlos at 773-391-2047. Since the information you gave me is still identifiable and linked to your name, I can remove your data from the research at any time.

You will be given a \$10 Starbucks Coffee Gift Card for your participation in the research. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, please contact me, Jerry Travlos at 773-391-2047 or by email at jtravlos@mail.depaul.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Compliance, in the Office of Research Services at 312-362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu. You may also contact DePaul's Office of Research Services if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

You may keep this information for your records

I have explained the study to you, and by signing the document below, you are indicating your affirmative agreement to be in the research.

Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Topic: A Phenomenological Study of Chicago's Independent School Principals.

Question: What is the essence of being an autonomous principal in the Chicago Public Schools?

Interviews: Approximately one hour in length. Five interviews will be conducted.

Thank participant and briefly discuss the purpose of the interview. Remind participant that identifying information will be kept confidential. Share reason for using a recording device. Request consent via the Information Sheet for Participation in Study and read consent prompt regarding recording on interview.

To Be Read to Each Participant: **This conversation is being recorded for research purposes. Please let me know now if you do not agree to being recorded. You may request that the recording stop at any time.**

- Tell me about your leadership story?
 - Years of experience as a teacher/administrator?
 - What inspired you to become a teacher/administrator?
 - Why did you decide to enter administration?
 - Describe your leadership preparation training?
 - Years employed with the Chicago Public Schools?
 - Do you have experiences working outside of Chicago Public Schools?
 - How would you describe your current role to others?
 - What year were you designated as an Independent School Principal?
 - Can you explain what being an Independent School Principal means?
 - How do you perceive it?
 - What is it like?
 - How does it feel?
 - Can you describe the process for achieving Independent School Principal status?
 - Can you explain why you applied for and accepted this designation?
 - How is being an Independent School Principal perceived by colleagues, teachers, staff, parents, students, community, Local School Council members, and others?
 - What are the similarities and differences between an independent principal and a traditional principal?
 - Benefits? Challenges?
 - According to the Office of Principal Quality, the Independent School Principals program was created to reward high performing principals with increased autonomy, to expand leadership impact through innovation and collaboration, and to build streamline structures that support increased autonomy.
 - What opinions do you have about traditional versus autonomous models of management?
 - What does autonomy mean to you and how do you leverage it?
 - How do you perceive your autonomy?
 - How does autonomy impact your leadership?
-

- Do you find yourself innovating and collaborating more?
 - What streamline structures if any have you helped implement?
 - How do you feel about the program?
 - Reflect on your decision to apply and become an Independent School Principal, are you satisfied with your decision? Explain.
 - Is there anything else you would like to say, share or add? Any questions for me?
-